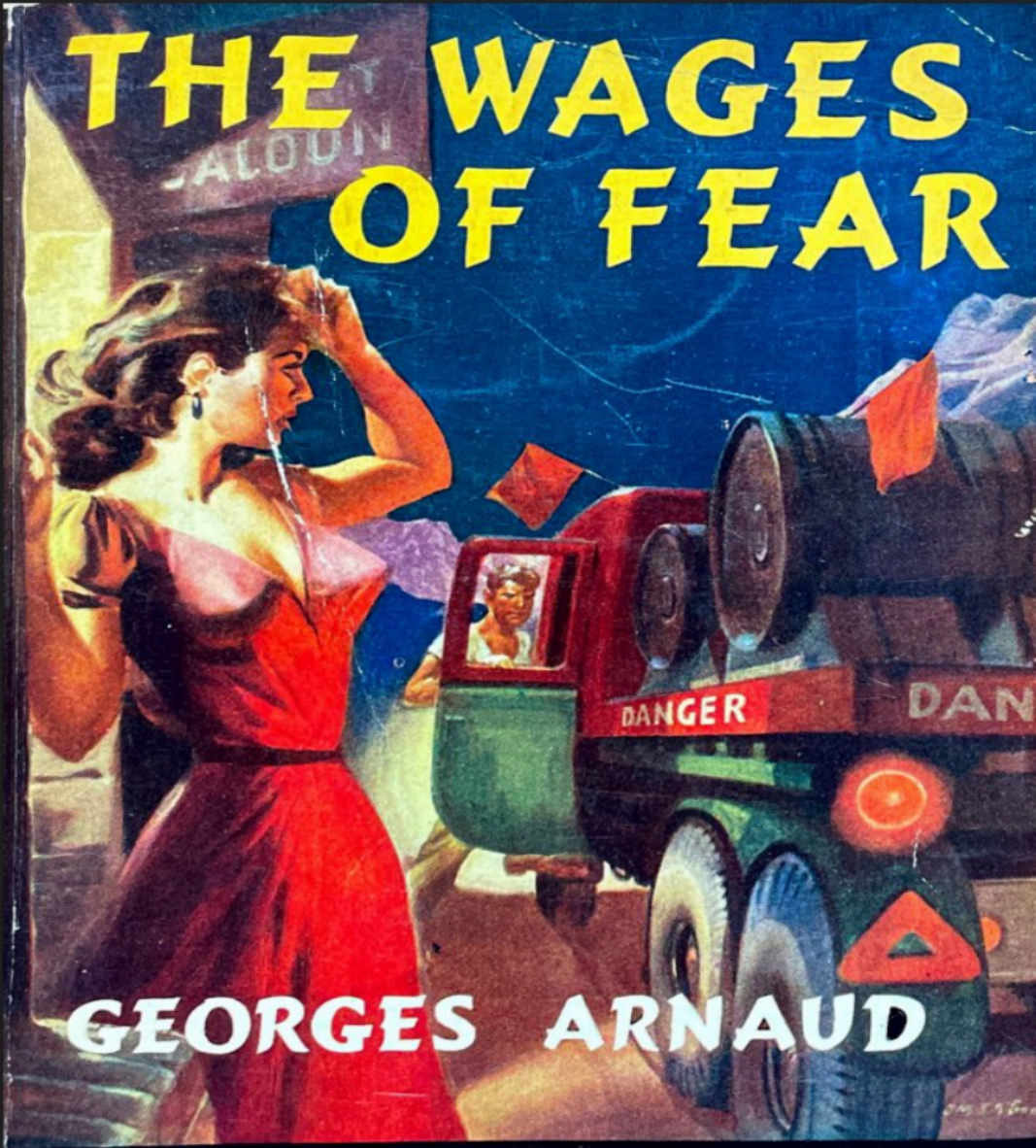
THE WAGES OF FEAR



GEORGES ARNAUD

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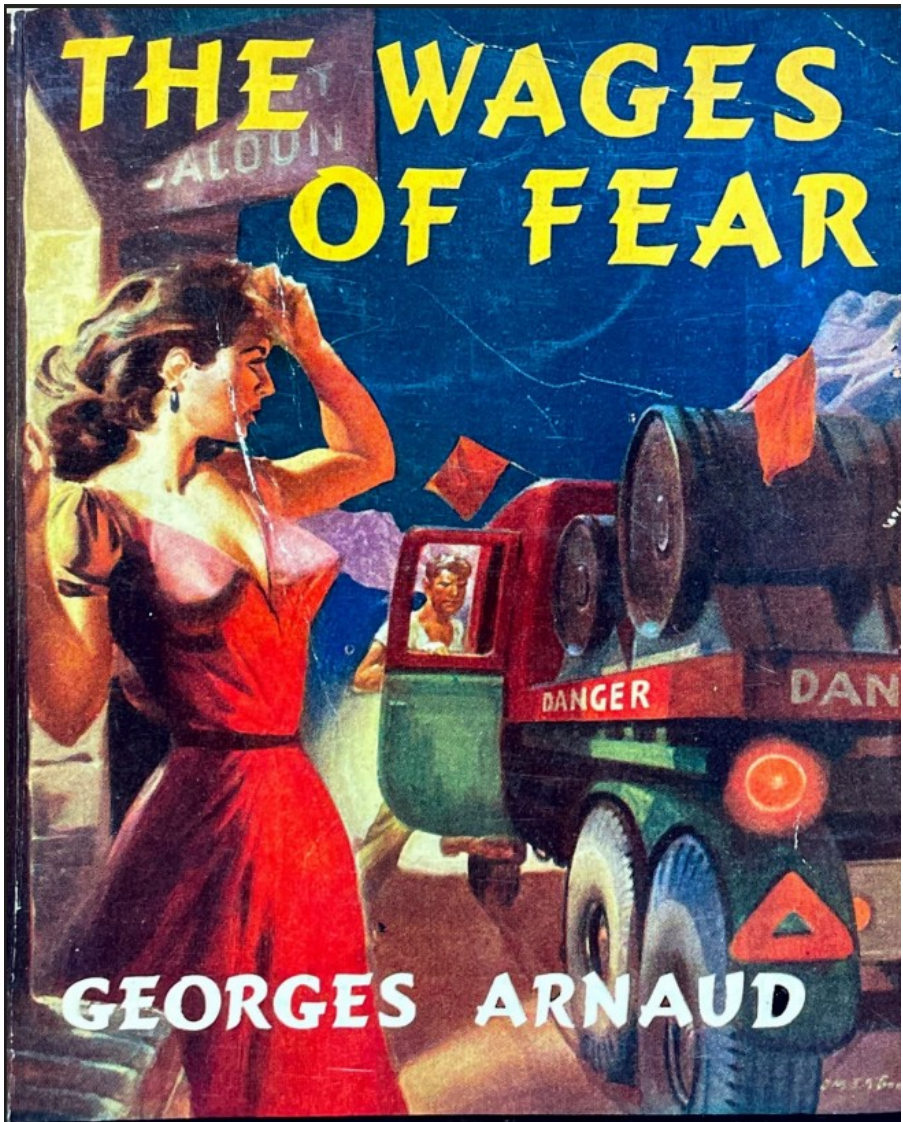

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THE WAGES OF FEAR

When Number 16 well of the Crude Oil Corporation's field blew its top the nearest store of nitroglycerine was 300 miles away in Las Piedras. There, a hastily-written sign "DRIVERS WANTED. DANGEROUS WORK. HIGH PAY" drew the white riff- raff of the port, among them the tough smuggler Gerard.

Nitroglycerine, the dreaded explosive that will detonate at the slightest jolt or at a high temperature, was the only available explosive to halt the gushing blast of flame and smoke. A ton of it had to be transported on ordinary lorries, with no special safety devices, over rough mountain roads, spattered with boulders and pot-holes. Not for one moment does the tension let up. This is a novel of suspense and fear that will leave you breathless.

The B.B.C.'s dramatic presentation of this story was a notable success and the film, under the original French title, LE SALAIRE DE LA PEUR, gained the Grand Prix at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival.

LE SALAIRE DE LA PEUR
(Paris 1950)
THE WAGES OF FEAR
(London 1952)

GUILD BOOKS No. 469

THE WAGES OF FEAR

A novel of suspense translated by
NORMAN DALE from the French of
GEORGES ARNAUD

Published for
THE BRITISH PUBLISHERS GUILD LIMITED
by John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd., 28, Little Russell St., London, W.C.1.

FIRST PUBLISHED IN ENGLAND 1952
REPRINTED 1952
REPRINTED 1952
FIRST PUBLISHED IN Guild Book 1953

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Made and printed in Great Britain by C. Tinling & Co. Ltd.
Liverpool, London and Prescot.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Topographical accuracy is not to be looked for in this book. The Guatemala of the story does not exist. I know; I have lived in Guatemala.

G. A.

I

THE TELEPHONE rang incessantly in the Superintendent's office in the wooden huts of the Las Piedras camp. Strained and harassed workers passed feverishly from one room to the next, the swing doors rebounding behind them.

'Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Last night. . . . No, I haven't yet been there myself. I didn't get the news till too late. Ryner's in a hell of a state-severe nervous shock. His personal responsibility's limited, of course. The Committee of Inquiry—it'll be Wednesday, I expect. Statements by the natives? There's only one left. The other was dead by the time the ambulance arrived. The one left—well, naturally his story will confirm Ryner's, just that and nothing more. A pure accident, that's all. Sure. Yes, for the press. They're going to give us a tough enough time in any case. Anyway it's easier for you to fix them than it is for us. . . . Fourteen natives killed! . . . They've never stopped pushing us around with their goddamned safety commissions! . . . Pensions? As small as possible, naturally. I'll call you back this afternoon.'

A filthy business. Looked at in one way, it was far better that Ryner had cracked, so that he was now in a state of semi-idiocy. If he had come through with his wits intact it might have been too much for him altogether-and as a result, embarrassing for the Corporation.

'Long-distance from Toronto for Mr. Ryner, chief. What do I say?'

'Who is it?'

'His mother.'

'Give her a short account of the accident and the hospital report. And tell her not to bother us. We're the Crude Oil Corporation, not a Mother's Day Society. Tell her to leave her number. If he dies we'll call her back.'

The Superintendent's secretary disliked having to do his own thinking. A short account . . . it was easy to talk. The thing was too new: it had only happened the night before.

A night like any other during the past three months . . .

The darkness over the Zulaco oil-field was relieved that night as usual by elegant silhouettes: the *taladros*, the drill towers, lighted with garlands of electric bulbs. The team at Number Sixteen was at work. A diesel generating plant supplied light, power and compressed air. Floods were attached to the lateral beams fifty feet above ground. When the diesel slowed the lights grew dim. At the centre of the tower

the bore, rotating endlessly like a giant screw, drove its way steadily into the viscous mud of the well, which was fed with water from two tank lorries. Turning at the rate of a hundred revolutions a minute, it sank fifty. feet in each twenty-minute spell.

Half-caste Indians in aluminium helmets, their naked torsos gleaming with sweat, came and went about the monster they nourished with water and heavy oil. Directly the entire length of the bore-tube had vanished into the earth the power was cut off and the driving-head disconnected. The Crude Oil Corporation's equipment at Derrick No. 16 was of a rudimentary kind. The new tube was hoisted into position by the fifteen men of the team pulling on tackles. The slender steel cylinder, as long as the tower was high, rose lurching and swaying until it hung vertically. An acrobat equipped with a bight of rope and a large-jawed spanner caught it as it swung, and leaning back on his heels steadied it so that it rested on the threaded mouth of the previous tube, just visible above the soil. While his assistant held it in position he climbed the framework of the tower, releasing the strops of the tackle that had hoisted it up. The men who had done the hoisting stepped prudently aside. The one man was now in charge of the ponderous, slippery tube. Clutching it to his chest with both arms he shifted it slightly, straining every muscle in his body. The rope holding him to the framework of the tower cut into his diaphragm and flanks and waist. If he bungled, he risked being crushed by the tube. A last effort, and he had it in place. The engineer pulled the lever that set the machinery in motion. There was a click. Caught in the jaws of the overhead rotating chuck, the tube screwed itself into the one below. Then at a gathering speed—sixty, eighty, a hundred revolutions a minute—it began to thrust its way into the earth, while the man who had set it up released himself from his rope and climbed down. No time to waste on all this: there was a bonus for speed, based on the number of boretubes sunk during the ten-hour shift. The sweat and sometimes the blood of these men was needed to keep the plant operating throughout the hot and sleepy night during which they longed for the day.

Every twenty minutes, when a new tube was being fixed, the engineer in charge took a sample of the mud, examining it under one of the arc-lights to check its consistency and density. If necessary he analysed it with the help of a few haphazard instruments on the engine-minder's bench. The smallest error could be dangerous to the progress of the work. If the head of the drill had penetrated into an over-dry stratum it would grow hot and might disintegrate with the terrifying suddenness of steel. The fragments flung out by the tension of the revolving metal might kill men and even overturn the derrick. On the other hand, if the mud was too liquid, if the drill was passing

through a pocket before reaching the true oil level, a bubble of inflammable gas might come up with a huge rush, threatening again to overturn the derrick and to take fire at the smallest spark, from the engine, from a fragment of metal made red-hot by friction, from anything. And in that case . . .

Ryner, the engineer, was worried. Things weren't as they should be that night. On two occasions small bubbles had appeared around the bore-hole. He had not dared to test them with a naked flame, they seemed to him to give off a smell of petroleum. But the wind sweeping over the plain, the *alizé*, always bore with it a sweetish smell of oil. Who could tell the difference?

Not far away the Anaco beacon, the most powerful in the world, brandished above the plain a torch which turned the shadows to copper. Ryner waited anxiously for the return of the second water-lorry which had gone off some time ago to refill at the nearest water-post. The one that remained was nearly empty. But he could not bring himself to interrupt the work. It was he who got the lion's share of the bonus. He got into his truck and went off to see what had happened to the lorry.

Because of the evenness of the encircling horizon, which everywhere reached a uniform height, the plain seemed absolutely flat. In reality there were numerous ridges and valleys, and once he had lost sight of the upper lights of the derrick Ryner had difficulty in finding his way. The over-bright, over-diffused beacon, of which one saw only the reflection in the sky, gave little guidance. It was a matter of following the tyre-tracks, and at a point where two paths diverged two sets were to be seen, diverging also. Ryner stopped the truck, and getting out tried to resolve this problem by the light of the headlights. The two water lorries were of the same make and equipped with the same kind of tyres. The two sets of tracks looked equally recent.

'What the devil has the fool done? The good trail is the one to the left.'

He started again and followed the left-hand trail for what seemed to him a very long time: it was night and he was worried. Eventually he reached the water-post, where the lorry should be. Standing beside the truck he probed the darkness with the long pencil of his spotlight. There was nothing to be seen, not even the pump, although he could hear the distant thudding of the engine. He swore beneath his breath.

The night was growing still hotter, yet his shirt, soaked in sweat, chilled his back when the breeze touched it—although it was a warm wind, the *alizé*. . . . He lit a cigarette and looked at his watch. The water would be needed at the derrick in less than twenty minutes.

Starting up the truck once more, Ryner began to search, pausing

occasionally to listen. He could still hear the noise of the pump. The track now followed the course of the stream; the going was soft and the wheels span. Suddenly he came to a stop. A lump of congealed sand rattled against the bottom of the radiator. The engine had stalled, and the back wheels had sunk half up to the axles in sand. Lashed to the side of the truck was a stout, long-handled spade intended for emergencies such as this. He first attacked the obstacle in front, and then dug troughs around each of the four wheels, lining them with dried grass which he pulled up in handfuls. Unused to this kind of labour, he went at it over-hastily and clumsily, sweating more and more, and wasted time in consequence. It was ten minutes before he got moving again. A hundred yards farther on the water-lorry bore down on him and pulled up. Ryner jumped on to the running-board and thrust his head through the window.

'For God's sake step on it! They're damn nearly out of water.'

The driver nodded and moved on without replying. He, too, had sweat running down his cheeks.

'Why the devil should it be so hot to-night?' Ryner muttered to himself.

He could not keep up with the lorry, whose greater weight prevented it from skidding. In any case, he was half-blinded and his throat parched by the cloud of dust it kicked up. He stopped to let it get clear of him, and feeling calmer, fished out another cigarette, lighted it, and inhaled deeply and tranquilly. Mechanically his hand moved along the facia-board, finding and turning a knob. For a moment the radio blared. It was the Las Piedras transmitter, covering a radius of three hundred miles from the cliff overshadowing the port. He listened to the voice of a negro singer who three weeks before had performed in the Crude Oil Corporation's mess.

Fish got to swim, birds got to fly;
I got to love one man till I die;
Can't help lovin' dat——

Suddenly the radio cut out. The heavy, ominous, velvet silence of the plain again took possession of the night. Ryner trod on the self-starter, once, twice, without result. The current had failed. The needle of the ampèremeter, illumined by a cigarette-end, was motionless. The American felt suddenly an intruder, out of place in this desert. The hostility of inanimate objects frightened him.

He got out and raised the bonnet, found the battery and with the aid of a torch checked the cables and connections. Everything seemed to be in order. The battery was not dead. Nevertheless, he could get no

response from the starter.

He began to grow singularly agitated, forgetting that he was a trained and experienced engineer for whom Ford engines and their electrical equipment were mere child's play. He stood there muttering curses, consumed with a sudden longing to be back in his childhood—a child able to sulk when things went wrong. In an evil temper, with hasty, violent movements, he sought for the broken contact. It took him twenty minutes, although it turned out to be an elementary matter, a simple breakage of the wire within its insulating cover. But of course there was no replacement in the tool-box.

He kicked the door of the truck shut, stayed motionless for a moment, and then, leaning through the open window, retrieved his cigarettes and matches from the seat. The beam of the electric inspection lamp, which he had attached to his belt, wavered in front of him. He started off into the night.

Five miles of sand to cover! Well, but the second water-lorry would be coming along soon to refill. The worst of it was the need to keep one's eyes constantly on the ground so as not to wander off the track. Otherwise this nocturnal stroll would not be so unpleasant. He breathed deeply, his face to the breeze. Shooting stars gleamed incessantly in the sky. You'd have your work cut out if you wanted to make a wish for every one of them! Ryner kept on walking, judging by his watch the distance he had come, and growing increasingly uneasy at seeing neither the distant lights of the derrick nor those of the second lorry. Anxieties and misgivings began to fill his mind. The natives were alone at the well-head. The foreman had been given precise instructions—provided he kept to them, and didn't play any tricks with the speed of the drilling. It was true that he was well-used to the routine. Still, it was unwise to have left them.

The reflection of the Anaco beacon pervaded the darkness, but it was not helpful. As for the derrick, it was well down in a hollow—you saw it when you were on top of it.

Suddenly Ryner stopped short. There were no tracks ahead of him. None behind him either: a man was not heavy enough to leave footprints on the hard crust covering the sand. Like an idiot, he'd lost his way through staring about him. He sat down to think it over . . .

And suddenly a monstrous flash of light revealed that he had not been far from his objective. It was followed almost instantly by a thunderous report. The derrick had gone up in the air.

The light grew less, but did not vanish. In the wake of the explosion fragments of metal passed whistling over his head, reminding him of the war. Utterly overwhelmed by the event, for which he felt himself to be responsible, Ryner began to run. Chance alone decided that he

should run straight ahead, since his terror was certainly greater than his anguished desire to see what had happened. He ran. Something struck him a heavy blow on the chest, causing him to stagger violently and fall. He got up with heavy limbs, spitting sand out of his mouth, and went on again. His lungs were bursting. Being forced to get his breath he lay flat on his face as he would have done under an artillery barrage, unconsciously striving with every muscle to dig himself into the earth.

The old symbols still hold good; he regained his strength and once again started forward. Over two miles still separated him from the scene of the disaster; it took him nearly an hour to cover them. When at length he reached the scene it was no longer the young man known to his colleagues in the Crude Oil Corporation mess—a tall, amiable, slightly foolish young man—who stood gazing in horror at the huge jet of flame roaring up through the carcase of the derrick. It was a man with a bleeding and muddied face, ankles damaged and heart strained with running through the darkness; a man spitting blood without knowing whether it came from his mouth or from some internal injury.

The fire was making fine play, with the *alizé* driving a great plume to the westward, scorching and cracking the earth. The wind was blowing hard at that moment, but its voice was lost in the thunder of the fiery column spurting skywards, still hurling fragments of metal into the air. The derrick, broken in halves, lay on its side, crushing beneath its incandescent mass the compressor and the benches where the men deposited their clothes and food basins when they came to work. In addition, the flame had twisted the skeleton of the tower and now was causing it to rear itself upright again, so that it looked as though it wanted to resume work. The lorries standing a short distance away had caught fire and their tanks had burst; but the five tons of water thus scattered over the burning oil and petrol had done nothing but enliven the flames. Two smaller jets of flame, seeming trivial by comparison, completed the picture of disaster.

Two natives stood to windward of the cataclysm, clutching one another by the shoulders and shouting as they gazed words that were not words at all—ejaculations in the Guaharibo dialect signifying death and fear. The American had no need to understand their language to realise this. Thirteen of their comrades had perished in the flames, and they were on the edge of madness, as he was himself.

There could be no question of approaching the crater from which the column of fire arose like a cylinder, its shape perfectly symmetrical. Ryner reflected in terror that the two survivors would report his absence to the Committee of Inquiry. Thirteen dead already. The devastation made him think more and more of the war. It would be so easy to dispose of those two who were left, and so be alone, to tell

whatever story he chose. But whether from genuine scruples, or from lack of will-power, he could not bring himself to do it. In any case, his head was no longer very clear.

He drew near to them and stared at their faces. Both had heavy burns which they did not appear to notice. Their eyebrows and patches of their hair had been singed to nothing. They were not weeping, probably because they did not know how. Ryner tried to speak to them.

'*Que fué?* What happened ?'

From their silence it was clear that they did not even hear him. They were thinking of nothing, lost in some limbo midway between the death of their comrades and their own lives . . .

Six hours later, urgent and constantly repeated, a syren sounded. The engineer in charge of well-head No. 19 had heard the explosion, seen the fire and telephoned to headquarters at Las Piedras. The Crude Oil Corporation's ambulance column was arriving. The first-aid party descended accompanied by a rescue-squad, seven men in helmets and asbestos overalls. They found Ryner, engineer in charge of Derrick No. 16, squatting on the sand between the corpse of a native and another who seemed to be dying.

'My God!' he was murmuring. 'My God! My God!'

The account of these events given by the Superintendent's secretary to old Mrs. Ryner was naturally much condensed. Nevertheless it took him several minutes, while he wondered how much a minute the call would cost. He came at length to the most ticklish part of the business, the medical report.

'Just one minute, Mrs. Ryner, while I. . . . Just hold the line.'

He flicked over a sheaf of pink, printed documents —'Body irrecoverable'; 'Body irrecoverable'—those were the natives. . . . 'Generalised, third-degree burns, double fracture of the skull . . .' that was the one who had died later. . . . The voice of the old lady in Toronto chattered sharply out of the receiver lying on the desk at his side, but he could not understand a word she was saying. Nor did he try to do so. He had found what he wanted.

'Mrs. Ryner? Here's what the medical report says, Mrs. Ryner: Cerebral congestion following internal injury. Severe nervous shock. Condition serious. I'd better repeat that. Condition serious. Did you get that, Mrs. Ryner? I think you'd better give me your phone number just in case—er—in case. . . . Can you hear all right, Mrs. Ryner? What's that? Mrs. Ryner——'

He put the receiver back on its cradle, looking slightly annoyed.

'She must have hung up on me,' he said to the typist who sat facing him. 'If she calls again, perhaps you wouldn't mind . . .'

II

It was a ten hours journey by road to the scene of the disaster, whether by jeep or by Head Office car. The Superintendent and his staff, with backs and buttocks increasingly bruised by the innumerable pot-holes, found it hard to keep their thoughts on the level of the event. Many hours before they reached the spot they were able to steer by the dense column of smoke that masked a whole sector of the horizon; but when at length they arrived the sight of the huge flame, which still seemed to be feasting on the remains of the steel framework, for a moment robbed them of their breath.

'No smoke without fire!' muttered O'Brien, the Superintendent, jumping out of the staff car with a youthful impetuousness which he instantly regretted. His back ached abominably, and one leg, which had gone to sleep, collapsed under him, so that he nearly fell.

The fire was angry, the Indians said. It had broken everything. Nothing was left of the body of the derrick. The seven men contemplated it at a distance of a hundred yards, some holding up their hands to shield their faces. The head of the insurance department, a sturdy, red-faced man going on for forty, had got a pad out of his pocket and was making notes. O'Brien, more of a man than the rest, more able to take a cool view of catastrophe, was amused by this.'

'Pity you can't get close enough to look for fingerprints,' he said. 'Well, I've seen all I want. The sight makes me giddy.'

His Irish brogue, which he had never entirely lost, and which sounded that day more pronounced than ever, seemed to lend added point to his mockery. The insurance man's face turned slightly more red, but he did not reply. While the Superintendent went back to the car, and without affectation picked up a newspaper, he continued to estimate distances, which he carefully wrote down.

The spout of flame seemed to derive from the very soil itself, the hard, thick, strange matter of which it was composed. An unbroken pillar of fire reared itself up to a great height, not dispersing but losing itself in the black ceiling of smoke. The occasional small flames that fell within sight were more like miniature explosions than drops of fire. The pillar existed in its own right, living and real. Whether its life was to be long or short, it had its pre-ordained task to perform, to rise up into the sky, to rush into the sky. It performed it as though in a frenzy.

O'Brien presently left the car and came back to the group of men. Inquests did not interest him. He would have had no future in any kind

of government department, where the principal business is to explain away what has happened, rather than to act and struggle against circumstances as they arise. Above all, he was a fighter, and at that moment he was furious. He was furious with the fire. Not that it did him any harm. Whether it was put out or not, it would not prevent his salary as Superintendent for Guatemala, plus special allowance for the tropical zone, being paid promptly on the first day of each month. But that had nothing to do with it. O'Brien was furious with the fire simply because that was the way he felt. There are men who cannot do otherwise than be aroused to fury by obstacles, difficulties, the hostility of things and of the universe: without them we should still be living in the stone age.

'There's no kind of roadway leading to the approach trench,' he said. 'We shall have to dig a trench down wind, with a couple of zig-zags for safety when we get close.'

'We shall have to be quick about it,' said his secretary. 'The wind changes in three weeks.'

O'Brien had been treating him coldly, not having been much impressed by the way he had handled Ryner's mother. Now he gave him a more friendly glance. A gleam of sense at last!

'Well, we'd better be getting back.'

They returned to the cars. Throughout the return journey the insurance man wrestled with his report, wording it so as to reflect the utmost discredit upon the hot-headed Irishman. But O'Brien was thinking of nothing but his plan for extinguishing the fire, turning it over carefully in his mind. He could already picture the cautious advance of monstrous figures clad in asbestos, working their way to the very foot of the column to sap its base and cut it down like a tree. He could feel the silence that would succeed the crash of the counter-stroke, falling like a weight upon the plain and stifling the roar of the flame-spout as though beneath a mattress. Well, that was how other frenzies had been stifled, in the old days.

There is a wonderful simplicity about the method of extinguishing a flaming oil-gusher. You simply blow it out, like blowing out a match. But you have to blow hard. You need explosives, and not just any explosive. The kind of explosive that will suffice to wreck the work of men's hands over a radius of hundreds of yards is still not powerful enough to snuff out his ancient enemy, the fire.

Leaving the plateau, the vast plain with its hundred scattered derricks, the cars embarked upon the descent which took them back into Las Piedras. For the last fifteen miles they travelled on a tarred surface along a well-kept stone embankment. It dropped down to the port with the steepness of a toboggan slide, made the more awe-

inspiring by its sharply winding course. A concrete rim, six inches high, marked the cliff-edge. Lower still the road wound back on itself and reached the sea after passing over a sort of pontoon bridge traversing the seven arms of the river Guayas. But the traveller saw neither sea nor river: the whole seaboard of the valley was nothing but a huge marsh over which hung a dense curtain of white mist. At the beginning of the steepest part of the descent the countryside was cut in two by this blanket of white. On the high ground behind was the South American desert, sandy and stony with its parched, grey vegetation, where the sun stayed at the zenith twelve hours out of the twenty-four. And lower down there was nothing but a soggy heaving of quicksands. No driver of any vehicle, even those born in the country, could pass that way without a shiver.

The total descent was a matter of about four thousand feet. The road through the mist dropped a thousand feet in a little over a mile and a half, a gradient of about one in seven. It had caused the death of a number of drivers at the time when the Crude Oil Corporation was building the great pipe-line which served to bring the oil from the remotest of the wells to the mole at Las Piedras. Big tractor-trailers, most of them old and out of condition, brought loads of fifteen-inch piping in fifteen-yard sections, each section weighing about a quarter of a ton. From fifty to sixty of them were piled in a pyramid on the trailer, with their front ends resting on the after end of the tractor. And sometimes, at the steepest part of the climb, the engine would give a cough. There would be a shudder or two, and then no sound except the soft sliding of wheels no longer under control. Jump for it, driver—jump! He had to get the door open on the steering-wheel side, where it was held down by its own weight as the tractor tilted, and if he did not manage it in a matter of seconds the argument was over. To-morrow, or next week, the salvage squads with their crane lorries would with immense effort drag two corpses back on to the tarred track, one human and the other of metal, each to be taken to its appointed resting-place. At the time of the building of the pipe-line this work was very well paid.

No one spoke, either in the jeep or in the Superintendent's car. The two vehicles, both wearing a military aspect, kept close together. They crossed the bridges at high speed, slowed down to mount the broken paving at the police barrier, and speeded up again as they entered the San Matresco Parade—a name too large for the place, which was a bare twenty- five yards in extent. The light diffused by the white mist hurt the eyes more than the dazzling sunshine on the plateau. Squalid hovels huddled close to the ground, bathing in the pale, warm murk: the town sweated out its mist, an enfeebling vapour, the rarified distillation of vegetable matter in a gassy state.

The cars passed by the Policia, a long, low building like a plaster shoe-box, which housed the upholders of authority and enclosed those who had chosen to take issue with them. The windows were protected by metal grills like chicken-wire. The doors were undoubtedly the most solid components of the entire building.

Seated in the doorway on a chair of antique design, a soldier in a flat cap on the peak of which was painted the number of his battalion, maintained what was described in the regulations as a vigilant guard. He held his rifle, bayonet fixed, upright between his knees, and day-dreamed of indecencies. Roused by the sound of motors he leaned back towards the interior of the building, and called to his immediate superior:

'General, the gringos have come back.'

'The foreigners? Who cares?' replied that officer.

At three minutes distance from the centre of the town began the district of abandoned houses. Five years previously Las Piedras had been the most prosperous port on that part of the coast. It was now dead. The Crude Oil Corporation had paid the Government of the Republic a thirty years' advance against royalties for the use of the port, and since then they had not brought in a pennyworth of trade. Such are the economic vicissitudes that beset these small countries.

Crumbling houses, holes, miry puddles, vague expanses scattered with cubes of cement, stretches of mud, ponds stagnating in the middle of the road. . . . To guard against mosquitoes and the danger of malaria a black coating of oil covered everything, and as the cars passed viscous splashes were flung noisily against the walls of the houses.

At a short distance from the centre the Americans had dynamited an entire deserted residential quarter. They had cleaned it up with bulldozers, spread a surface of concrete and put a railing around it. It was here that they had settled, and amid the desolation of the town, that looked as though it had undergone a bombardment, their little wooden houses were the only ones to remain newly painted, gay and living. But each exactly resembled the other.

The two cars entered this enclosure and pulled up in front of the central building. The Medical Supervisor was just coming out. He turned towards O'Brien.

'The second Indian's dead.'

'And Ryner?'

'He's dying, I'm afraid.'

O'Brien gave a sigh of nothing but relief.

'Jimmy,' he said to his secretary, 'you'll phone the word through to

the old lady the moment it's final. And if she faints this time at the sound of your voice, I'm darned if I don't sack you!'

Jimmy found her very difficult.

III

'Anda, Manolete, anda!'

'*Anda, toro! Que bravo!'*

The voices rang out strongly in the saloon of the Corsario Negro, the hot-spot of Las Piedras, but they seemed to be transmitted by mechanical means. At the sound of them one did not think of *aficionados* rising to their feet in the stands, but looked round for the blaring loud-speaker relaying the commentary on a bull-fight. Perhaps this was due to the dank mist which eddied through the house as it did over the town. The people of Las Piedras called it 'cayman's breath,' in tribute to the innumerable crocodiles that infested the delta. Nevertheless, the voices were flesh and blood and not the outpouring of any box, as one realised if one continued to listen.

'Matala, toro!'

'Respecto a Manolete, que ya es muerto!'

'Que va, muerto? Maricon Dios!'

There were three of them, seated to one side round a table.

The saloon was large, its white walls adorned with posters. The bar was on the right as one entered. An authentic portrait of the Black Pirate, who had never existed, hung above it. He carried a pistol in either fist, a boarding cutlass between his teeth, a girl in his arms, and the painter had used some kind of phosphorescent substance for his eyes. The girl was beautiful and shameless, evidently greatly stirred by the arrogant bearing of her ravisher. The breast which had slipped out of her corsage was adorned with a more than lifelike carnation, but vandals had embellished her person with sex symbols of an ingenuous kind.

At the far end of the room were five alcoves, their entrances covered by brightly coloured curtains. This was where the business went on. The girls were. at present seated behind a long table of dark wood. Only one was pretty—Linda, who belonged to Gerard, the former smuggler. Slender, dark, her whole body firm and supple, she represented, with her black, fine hair and her smooth, soft skin the perfect type of half-caste woman. The four others were ugly, but their very heaviness and dull-wittedness seemed to invest their animal bodies with a constant, powerful sensuality.

For practical purposes the place was deserted at that moment. Outside the painful heat of mid-morning weighed upon the town. In a little while, at eleven o'clock, there would be the sudden outrush from

the docks. The dockyard workers would come to restore their spirits with a glass of aguardiente and the scent of feminine flesh. A few would let themselves be ensnared by a glimpse of brown thighs through the slit in a skirt, a tongue passed over lips heavily smeared with lipstick. The women would make haste, leading the way into the cells at the back, their hips swaying as they moved. They would draw the curtains behind them, and it would be almost worse than if they had made love in the open. But for the present everything was quiet. There were only the marihuana smokers.

For the tipped cigarettes from which the three men were blowing out heavy grey clouds were stuffed with marihuana, the drug of controlled delirium. You needed only a tiny handful of the weed; you closed your eyes, and the dream you chose was at your command. Within a quarter of an hour you could be Hitler dancing his jig on the terrace outside the Palais de Chaillot, the driver of the racing car you always yearned for, the lover of Rita Hayworth, with full details, a Professor of Philology at the School of Oriental Languages or the father of quintuplets. You had only to decide. And it did not end in suicide in a bunker, or a crashed car, or any other disaster. You made love seven times and were ready for more; you knew the etymologies of all the least-known languages; you shook hands with the King of England. Of course, you woke up in the end, and it had to be done all over again. But such is marihuana, made up into cigarettes and sold at an absurdly low price in all the seaports of Latin America.

On this particular day the smokers at the Corsario Negro had decided to have a session of bullfighting.

The drug lent a strange ring to their voices, cut short their breath, drew from them unexpected cries. Marihuana had transformed the round table, whose surface was of cement, not of marble, spreading upon it a covering of the sand of the arena, golden sand. For their delight it had given new shapes to familiar objects, turning them into the dense and colourful crowd that on feast days springs to life for a few hours round the bull-ring. Ash-trays, saucers, empty coca-cola bottles and a half-empty bottle of rum had become nimble banderilleros, richly clad picadores, austere civil guards—all the variegated company that were a necessary preliminary to the stroke of death. What was more, Manolete was there. Manolete who had let himself be killed two years before by his hundred- and-eighth bull. Manolete, the idol of the afficionados.

In the eyes of the smokers the bull-fight really took place, even though one of them might from time to time shift a glass with a furtive movement to assist the proceedings; but to the unhocussed spectator its obvious make-believe was irritating and painful. The proprietor of the establishment, a flabby, sallow European named Roberto

Hernandez, contemplated them sulkily and almost furiously, concealing his feelings beneath an air of affected patience. Using the dish-cloth to wipe the sweat from his shining face he grunted:

'A pretty lot!'

Indeed, they were. Two were half-caste Indians, stunted, thin, jumpy creatures, their coarse hair shining like black paint. But the older of the two had lost a good deal of his hair, and a closer look showed that some sort of alopecia had attacked his scalp. Both wore the mongol moustache, waxed and cruel.

The third was a white man about sixty years of age. He was a skeleton. His wrinkled face was set in heavy folds of grime; his hair was white, his hands restless; at moments shivering spasms caused him to shake all over. His eyes, pale in colour like the eyes of those who have spent a great deal of time at sea, were deeply set beneath heavy eyebrows; but owing to the hollowness of his cheeks they seemed, as they rolled above his cheekbones, to be on a level with the rest of his face. He was subject to a sort of convulsion, in four rapid stages, which might have seemed the expression of impatience due to some reasonable cause: he coughed, laughed, uttered five or six words and then fell silent, his features relaxed, his face expressionless. Then he went through the same process again. It lasted scarcely a minute.

The three men suddenly leaned closer over the table. Jacques, the European, muttered:

'It's not a bullfight, it's a butchery!'

'Anda, toro! Que brava, que ruda la bestia!'

For the three of them Manolete was unquestionably present on the table, killing bull after bull; and ten thousand impassioned spectators were seated on the two empty chairs at their side. But the proprietor found the whole thing more and more exasperating. Only the girls, regarding them with a semi-professional indulgence, were still well disposed.

The proprietor's wife was also there, behind the bar. In front of her was the cash-register, a new one, all gleaming nickel and glass panels. Old at thirty, withered and bloated, she sat bolt upright absorbedly contemplating this handsome contrivance, the token of her prosperity.

Between her and her husband a younger Indian woman was bent over the sink, washing last night's glasses,

A customer appeared wearing a grey drill uniform with green stripes. He looked like a shoeblack who had not found time to attend to his own shoes. A revolver holster in his leather belt, and an important array of stars and stripes on his sleeves, his breast and his cap,

proclaimed his status and his function: he was a second-grade clerk in the customs service.

'Greetings, Master!' he said to Roberto. 'Madame, your eyes fill me with dreams. Little one, you have a charming behind!'

'Good morning, Colonel,' replied the management and domestic staff of the Corsario. But the women were not stirred. Most South Americans are catholic in their tastes, but this one was entirely homosexual. He ordered a glass of punch, and sipped it while he gazed at the group of smokers.

'If he goes on chasing after Gerard I'll slit his stomach,' said Linda to her neighbour, who shrugged her shoulders without answering.

The marihuana was gaining in effect. Jacques had decided that he was General Franco, and that the Indian with skin disease was Evita Peron, the high-spirited wife of the Argentine dictator. He began to make love to him, addressing him as Senora. But the Indian had passed the age of ambivalence. Employing the absurd Spanish phraseology, he began to abuse Jacques, describing him as a pain in his mother's belly and his father's testicles. He concluded shrewdly:

'You've no more culture than an incestuous pig born on a dung-heap. Your father had the pox and your grandfather was a pimp.'

'Evita, my beloved, pay no attention to the words spoken through your adorable mouth by that revolting illiterate,' said Jacques.

The Indian stood up, genuinely enraged. Jacques also got uncertainly to his feet. For a moment they stood facing one another, on the verge of coming to blows; but the third man called for silence, and cried excitedly:

'Did you see the pass he made with his cape? The bull's a dangerous one, he's tasted man's blood! But Manolete will get him!'

Hernandez leaned over the bar and said to the servant:

'I don't mind putting up with their bloody nonsense if I get something out of it. Rosa, go and fill up the glasses.'

The girl rather doubtfully approached the three men, and said as she picked up an empty glass:

'What can I serve you with now, Monsieur Jacques—you and your friends?'

Jacques swung round to face her, looking extremely savage:

'You leave that alone, you slut!'

The girl was already withdrawing with the glass in her hand.

'Do you hear?' repeated Jacques. 'You leave that alone!' And he added dolefully: 'The bitch has taken away the bull!'

At the same moment the Indian perceived the extent of the disaster.

They exchanged the glances of men subjected to an intolerable injury. The girl took prudent shelter behind the bar.

The Indian with skin disease nodded and said:

'It's true. She's taken the bull.'

'What are we to do now?' demanded Jacques, suddenly tearful. 'Just when everything was so nice! I was Franco, and I was just going to slit the throats of the anti-Fascists. You were Evita, and you were going to poison Peron by putting arsenic in his caviar, and then you'd have been mistress of the Argentine. And then along comes this dirty-bottomed slut of a half-caste by-blow and takes our bull away and shames Manolete into the bargain! Are we going to stand for it?'

'Impossible,' said the third Indian. 'Quite impossible.'

The white man was by far the most excited. He got up again from his chair, his eyes rolling beneath discoloured lids, his lower lip trembling. He was dribbling slightly. The Indians were more able to stand the drug. They made an effort to push him back on to his chair, but he kept his balance better than might have been expected. After a short, unavailing struggle they turned away apathetically and left him to rage as he pleased.

Jacques picked up a glass, hurled it to the floor and trampled on the fragments. Then a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches went flying across the room. His fury increased. He flung a heavy ash-tray at the head of the Black Pirate, making a hole in the canvas. Hernandez shrugged his shoulders and went towards him. Jacques threw a glass at his head, bellowing in the voice of a spoilt child:

'My bull! Give it back or I'll do for the lot of you!'

Hernandez had ducked in time, and the glass smashed against the wall. A splinter chipped a piece out of the customs clerk's ear. The girls, now standing up, watched dispassionately. Hernandez, vigorous but not really angry, dealt Jacques two heavy slaps across the jaw, causing him to collapse, weeping. He then went back behind the bar.

Nearly a minute passed before the customs clerk realised that he had been wounded and had therefore the right to bellow like a hyena, which he at once proceeded to do. The blood was dripping on to his gold-lace epaulette and making little rivulets round his medals. While he estimated the amount of the damages he might claim—loss of prestige, injury, cleaner's bill—he burst into a harangue of impassioned eloquence.

'You're not in the antipodes, you filthy foreigner! You're in the centre of a civilised and educated town. Do you hear me? I have a right to speak, I, a pure Guatemalan, of the same blood as the heroes of the 24th of June, the 6th of July and the 24th of August!'

Hernandez was not impressed by this allusion to certain of those glorious dates in Guatemalan history which the Europeans refused to take seriously, because there were too many of them.

'Drink this and clear out,' he said to the wounded man, offering him a glass brimming with whisky.

Rosa, the innocent cause of the commotion, thoughtfully wiped the blood from his face with the dish cloth. The girls had sat down again. Jacques, huddled on his chair, was still sobbing convulsively and calling for his bull. He would not be long in recovering, but for the time being he was overwhelmed by the injustice of the whole affair. At this moment Gerard, Linda's man, came in. He seemed to be in a hurry.

'Drunk again!' he said, jerking his head towards Jacques. 'No matter, I've just had some news. The Crude Oil are taking on hands.'

'Does that mean you're looking for work?' said Hernandez. 'Wonders will never cease!'

'I'm interested in this job. The notice says, "Dangerous and well-paid".'

The proprietor of the Corsario gazed at him open-mouthed for a moment, and then found breath to ask:

'What is it?'

'No idea,' said Gerard. 'But whatever it is, it suits me. I'll clean up a packet, and then—good-bye, Las Piedras! I've had all I want of this hole.'

His gaze went round to Jacques, who was now crying quietly; it embraced the room, the customs clerk, the row o' girls.

'Look at Linda. Six months I've been trying to get her out of the racket and not a hope because we've got to eat. This bloody ruin of a town, and the mist, and the river stinking like a sewer—Christ! . . . They can have my soul if they're ready to pay! . . .'

IV

A YEAR PREVIOUSLY Gerard had arrived from Honduras on the eleven o'clock plane. He had walked briskly and casually into the Corsario as though he had come from the cafe across the road. On that day, too, Jacques had been weeping, doped with marihuana—but the thing happened to him on an average three times a week. Hernandez had gazed at the newcomer without seeming to recognise him; but Gerard took off his dark glasses and simply said:

'Morning, pal. Pay the cab, will you?'

Without answering directly, the proprietor of the Corsario Negro had gone to the cash register and got out a silver dollar, which he handed to the servant, saying:

'Give this to the driver.'

Yet his meanness was notorious. The witnesses of the episode had concluded that the stranger must know a lot about Hernandez. They were right.

Gerard had installed himself at the Corsario on the understanding that he was to pay twelve dollars a day. Although the arrangement did not at all please Hernandez, he had not dared to say anything. And in fact, his lodger had paid nothing. The debit had reached nearly two thousand dollars by the time Linda started to work for Gerard, who was if anything slightly irritated by the passion which caused her to fling herself at his feet, but who did not find that his efficiency as a pimp was in any way impaired by his lack of emotional response. After this he gave Hernandez a little money from time to time, but it seemed that the arrears had definitely to be written off.

It had not taken Gerard Sturmer long to explore the possibilities offered by the town and port of Las Piedras to a young man of his kind. He had at first looked round for a steady job, but the prospects were poor. The native populace lived in a state of extreme misery, racked and scourged by fevers, epidemics, hereditary diseases, and far too numerous for the little work which the port afforded.

Unemployment and famine had come to be a permanent state of affairs in that little rubbish-dump on the Pacific coast. The picture was completed by a handful of lean and hungry adventurers, some of them mercenaries driven out of the neighbouring countries by the destruction of the political party to which they had sold their services, and others, seamen, mostly Scandinavian, who had been induced to desert by the attractions of a bottle or a woman, expecting to be able to get away on the next ship. But overnight the situation had changed,

and there was no next ship. Nothing called at the port any more except American tankers, to tie up for six hours at the mole bearing the pipe-head from the Zulaco oil field. And with these there was nothing to be done: their crews were entirely American, members of the Golden Star union, a closed shop to which only Americans were admitted. Once a year a trader from Panama called and stayed for a week, but those who would have liked to embark in her had never enough money to win the captain's benevolence, and the holds were too small to conceal stowaways.

The derelicts who had come to rest in Las Piedras were all in a position similar to that of Gerard: chased out of the surrounding countries, ridden down by their past, imprisoned in a squalid, unhealthy corner of the earth where it was impossible for them to gain a living, and which they could not leave except to go very far away, as far as Mexico or Chile. There was no money. Remorselessly, pernicious anaemia destroyed their red blood-cells, dysentery racked their guts, fever and boredom, and their attendant drugs and debauches, sapped their minds. Workless and penniless they waited, desperately clutching at any improbable way out. The dilemma was a simple one: leave or die. They could not leave, and they refused to die. With fists and teeth clenched they beat against the bars of the mantrap into which they had fallen, filling the air with their helplessness . . .

'You can't take a plane without money. You can't get money without work. You can't get work. You can't take a plane. . . . You can scarcely stand from exhaustion; you have neither courage nor blood. . . . You can't rob the vaults of an American company when they're guarded by a squad of gorillas specially fed and trained to be able to kill a man with a blow of the fist. . . . You can't get away without money . . .'

Thanks to Linda's good heart, and her physical attributes, Gerard had at least been preserved from this extreme of wretchedness. But things had been very difficult at the beginning. Two days after his arrival he had paid a visit, as everyone did, to the Crude Oil Corporation's employment office. In a dusty, grey-ceilinged room furnished with four long benches arranged to form a square, about twenty unhappy creatures sat murmuring to one another about their miseries while they awaited their turn. They were emaciated and bright-eyed, and their smell was that of men who were hungry. Gerard crossed the room and knocked on the employment officer's door.

'Well, what is it?'

The voice was harsh and impatient. He went in and found himself face to face with the monster.

The man from whom one seeks work is always terrible to behold, but this one seemed worse than most. A long, lanky; pallid figure adorned

with gold-rimmed spectacles and teeth of the same metal, with a pencil behind one ear and a pen in one hand, sat heavily sweating over a printed form. Every now and then he picked up the portable electric air cooler and held it to his other ear, the one without the pencil: It was as though he were dusting off his brains with compressed air. He glanced casually at Gerard, and said:

'Nothing to-day, guy. Call in again some time.'

Two days later Gerard, ashamed of what he was going to do, called at the Government Immigration and Labour Office, which was lodged in an immense concrete building. The door was of bronze. Dampness had imprinted green rings everywhere, and raised blisters of mould. In the courtyard a large plaque proclaimed in letters of bronze the rights and duties of the immigrant. The conclusion was particularly remarkable.

'Whosoever enters Guatemalan territory imbued with courage and the desire to serve, endowed with health, perseverance and ardour, has the right to eat every day.'

How often a day they were to eat, and what, was not stated.

Behind an American-style desk in the entrance hall sat a clerk in uniform—that is to say, wearing khaki trousers, a white shirt, an untied black tie and a green eyeshade—who raised his hand in a gesture of refusal before a word could be said. But Gerard was undismayed. He cried, 'Hola, amigo!' in the voice of a man encountering a long-lost childhood friend. The astonished scribe raised his head, and something that in those latitudes might be called a smile showed itself on his yellow face.

As a reward for the eloquence with which he gave a high-flown and largely untruthful account of himself, Gerard received a form bearing his particulars—Gerard Sturmer, aged thirty-six, born in Paris; no criminal record; profession—supervisor. . . . Not until he got outside did he notice that it merely offered him employment at the docks.

He wrestled with his dignity, telling himself that there are ways and means. One may be a dock-labourer without ever touching a sack or a crate, and still show up at the pay-desk every Saturday. He went down to the port.

Sacks of cement were piled about twenty yards from the dockside, and roughly at right angles to it. There were a great many of them: the pile was about a hundred yards long, thirty yards wide and five yards high. Under the supervision of a foreman armed with a club and a whistle, some twenty men were picking up the sacks on their backs and carrying them to the far end of the mole, where they set them up in another pile a hundred yards long, thirty yards wide and five yards high. Everything suggested that when the transfer was completed

there would be nothing to do except to bring them back again.

Gerard drew near to the toiling men. Sweat was pouring off their bodies, working its way in strange patterns through the layer of cement dust which drew blood where the sacks chafed their skins. Their cheeks were sunken, their eyes fixed. As the breath painfully convulsed their hollow flanks one had the impression that something was lacerated inside them. Occasionally one of them would stop and cough, afterwards spitting a grey gob of phlegm and cement. If he took too long over it, the foreman blew two short blasts on his whistle. The next reminder was a blow from the club.

Gerard went up to him, holding out his piece of paper, and asked:

'What's the job?'

The foreman, a plump Indian with the look of a Chinese gaoler, offered him the whistle and the club with a fraternal air.

'It's to relieve me, comrade.'

Gerard gazed at him. The creature was positively friendly.

'I'd sooner have my next meal in the Model Prison, for the crime of having broken your neck. You can keep your filthy job!'

The other looked startled. Gerard shrugged his shoulders and went back to the Corsario for his midday meal, abandoning the search for honest work. He might have done so in the first place.

After this came the contraband project. For nearly a month two rich tradesmen, one a chemist dealing in illicit drugs and the other the proprietor of the only bazaar in the town, played pitch and toss with Gerard's hopes and aspirations. Gerard had realised from the first that if he himself had been able to put a little money into the enterprise, the two Guatemalans would have been ready to back him seriously. If he had even had a boat of his own they might have supplied the working capital. They had, indeed, come near to promising ten thousand dollars on that condition.

And on the other hand there was the proprietor of a drinking place along the coast who owned a schooner which could be made seaworthy by two thousand dollars worth of repairs. He might have agreed to sell the boat on credit terms to anyone who could get the repairs carried out. It was a seventy-footer built of teak, copper-sheathed below the water-line. An attractive prospect altogether: she would be worth not less than fifteen thousand once she was put in order. But Gerard did not possess two thousand dollars, and they were as hard to come by as if the sum were ten times as large. There was his problem in a nutshell. Given two thousand dollars he could at once lay his hand on a further ten thousand with which to acquire still more.

This state of affairs had persisted for eleven months. Twice a week

the Frenchman went the round of his future associates, simply for the purpose of keeping them interested. The rest of the time he just went on living. Sometimes he went and gazed at the schooner with a proprietorial eye. And then there was Linda.

But there were others besides Gerard feebly flapping their wings like limed birds in that deathly township. There was Hans Smerloff, who called himself Russian, Polish, Lithuanian or German according to the questioner and the latest news of the international situation. He had been Chief of Police in Honduras until circumstances obliged him to leave in a hurry. His friends were not altogether tactful in their comments:

'So you picked a General, Hans, but it turned out to be the wrong one?'

'Bastards!' said Smerloff, shrugging his shoulders. 'Pack of bloody bastards!'

But when he was asked about his plans for the future his face became cold and stern.

'What am I doing? Bit by bit I'm recruiting an army of starving assassins who won't leave two stones standing in the capital when I march in at the head of them.'

The game was to get him to admit that he had not a penny with which to buy the weapons essential to the enterprise. His downcast face made everyone laugh.

Then there was Bernardo Salvini, who had the look of a crooner but even less intelligence. He claimed that his passport bore a United States visa. When any newcomer appeared in the Corsario, the dishevelled, unshaven, down-at-heel young man would sit at his table and engage him in conversation.

'I believe you've just arrived, sir. Have you by any chance come from the States?'

After glancing at the anxious countenance, too young for the rest of him, the stranger would generally answer, 'No.'

'Have you lived there?' Bernardo would ask, and he would go on without waiting for a reply: 'I'm in a terrible position. I've an entry permit, but no money, and my passport expires in three months. I'm so afraid I shan't be able to earn enough money in time—the passage costs a hundred dollars. I beg your pardon, sir. Perhaps you would be so kind as to lend it to me.'

The answer was naturally, 'No.'

And there was Johnny. It was not his real name. He was a Rumanian who had taken refuge in Las Piedras after stabbing his best friend to death during a bout of whisky-drinking. Like Hans, he too

came from Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. It had been a silly episode, as knife-affrays between friends always are. But now that he had found a new best friend, in the person of Gerard, Johnny was less inclined to regret the one he had killed.

Still others. . . . Lewis, a homosexual Englishman who was only interested in negroes, and whose appearance suggested notions of fanatical respectability; Juan Bimba, a *dynamitero* in the Spanish civil war, driven out of Mexico by his Stalinist compatriots for not toeing the Party-line; Luigi; Cacahuete; Pedro the American; Deloffre, former French Minister at Caracas; Gomez, from Bogota. . . . Twenty of them all told, and all yearning to be free.

V

A NOTICE WAS posted outside the gate of the Crude Oil Corporation's enclosure:

'First-class truck drivers wanted. Dangerous work. High pay. Apply at the Office.'

A conference had been held that morning at the Superintendent's bungalow between the Superintendent, an expert sent from Dallas, Texas, who had arrived in one of the Corporation planes, the Chief of Transport and the Works Overseer.

'It's a bit of luck we've got a stock of nitroglycerine handy,' said O'Brien. He tossed the butt of his cigar out of the open window by which he had been leaning, spat and came back to the table. 'A bit of luck,' he repeated. 'But as for drivers, you can do what you darn well please. All I know is, we can't let the well go on burning indefinitely. If we're too slow getting started we shan't be able to do a thing till the wind changes.'

'When's that?' asked the man from Texas. 'What does the Meteorological Department say?'

O'Brien shrugged his shoulders and swore. The Met! The seasonal change in the *alizé* took place within the same comparatively short period every year, but no one in the damned country ever bothered to forecast it nearer than a month. One or two schooners were lost each year precisely on that account.

The Chief of Transport lit a cigarette.

'We're being asked to implement a decision which was taken before anyone had been properly consulted,' he said. 'The notice calling for drivers has been up since first thing this morning.'

He spoke with a good deal of emphasis, welcoming the chance to draw the attention of the man from the Head Office to the way O'Brien rode roughshod over his subordinates.

'It's just because the notice is up that I think all this talk is a waste of time,' said O'Brien. 'Let's go over it again. To bring a team of special drivers from the States would be plain crazy, particularly considering the kind of truck we've got to offer them—thoroughly dangerous for this particular job. That's so, isn't it, Humphrey?'

The Chief of Transport started slightly at being addressed by his christian name, and the others reflected that the old man was giving as good as he got.

'It's true they might be safer,' the Chief of Transport said. 'But if people had only listened to me——'

'I'm the one you're going to listen to,' said O'Brien. 'If we bring drivers from the States one of two things is going to happen—either they'll refuse to carry nitroglycerine on trucks without the necessary safety equipment, or else they'll accept. If they refuse, we've got to bring special trucks from Dallas, which will cost a lot of dough and take time. If they accept and anything goes wrong there'll be hell to pay with the Union. And if we send them home again and come back to my idea of using local drivers, the Union isn't going to like that either.'

It was a strong argument. Even the largest, richest and most powerful of industrial corporations finds it wise to go warily with the unions.

'And whichever way it goes there's going to be trouble,' O'Brien went on. 'We might as well face it. Considering the state the road's in, if you can call it a road, it'll be an almighty miracle if half the trucks don't get blown to hell. It's nitroglycerine those boys'll be shifting, not breakfast cereals.'

He had spoken the word nitroglycerine slowly and deliberately, pronouncing each separate syllable, and as the reality came home to them they fell silent.

'Well, then . . .' said the fire expert from Dallas.

'How much of the stuff do you reckon it's going to take?' asked O'Brien. 'And how many truckloads?'

'I'd say about a ton in five or six loads. It's better to spread the risk. You've got two tons here altogether. If we don't get enough to the spot, because we lose too much on the way, we'll just have wasted our time.'

'What do special trucks cost?' asked O'Brien, turning to the Chief of Transport, who started searching for the information in his leather brief-case.

The Dallas man answered for him.

'Seven thousand five hundred dollars apiece.'

'On top of which it'll cost a thousand bucks apiece to get them here. Then there's the insurance premium, and by God what a premium! And then . . .' O'Brien almost choked and said: 'No, gosh darn it, it's too much!'

Once again the silence made itself felt. O'Brien returned to the charge in the patient tones he might have used in explaining a recipe to his cook.

'Let's try and get it straight. Who's going to apply for the job anyway? For a start there'll be a gang of natives. We won't touch them.'

'Why not?' asked the Works Overseer innocently, opening his mouth for the first time. 'Why not? It looks to me——'

'It looks to you as though we hadn't got trouble enough already with the bunch that was killed day before yesterday—is that it?' said O'Brien. 'And if a few more citizens of this great and free republic get blown into thin air I suppose you figure the Government will pass a vote of thanks and we'll all get our pictures in the local papers. Sure!'

O'Brien's irony, as massive and ponderous as all the rest of him, had a bludgeoning effect which caused the other to duck his head slightly. He hastened to admit his error.

'I guess I didn't think of that.'

'O.K. Well, besides the natives, who's going to apply? The tramps, of course. How many deadbeats are there in this town just sitting around waiting for a chance, any chance, to get out? Those are the guys we want. They'll drive your trucks, Humphrey. They'd drive them through hell and high water. By God, they'd crawl on their hands and knees with the stuff on their backs, just so they earned their fare to Mexico. And no strings tied to them. No next of kin if they don't make it. No goddamned unions either!'

'Yeah—and we don't have to pay them so much!' said Humphrey.

But at this O'Brien started up. His customary toughness of manner was suddenly transformed into something no one round that table had seen before. Ever since the meeting began the young man, Humphrey, had been irritating him. Gripping him by the collar he lifted him up from his seat. A vein stood out on his temple, and his eyes were becoming suffused. He stayed for some moments rumbling in his throat before he could speak.

'You heel!' he said. 'You goddamned, low-down, lousy little heel! I ought to sock you!'

He let him go, and stood glaring at the others. He would have liked to knock their dull heads together, to shout at them, to tell them that he, Mike O'Brien, senior Regional Superintendent of the Crude Oil Corporation, had once been no better than a tramp himself, a deadbeat, a young man out of money and out of luck, humping his pack from place to place in search of a future. He had a right to be tough. But as for this Humphrey, the son of wealthy parents, three years out of college. . . . Haunted by the memory of his own poverty-stricken childhood, O'Brien cherished in his heart a bottomless contempt for Humphrey and all his kind.

Gradually he cooled down. When at length he was able to speak in a normal voice, he said quietly:

'I guess the least we can do is to pay these boys what the job rates, which is plenty. But we'll have to try and shift the stuff in two loads. We haven't got five or six trucks to spare. We won't find that number of drivers either—not ones that are good enough. If we can get two

teams and a reserve, in case of accidents, that's about all we can hope for. But I'll take care of all that. I'll see them and engage them myself.'

The meeting was over. The party rose from the table, and the man from Texas patted O'Brien on the shoulder.

'O.K., Mike,' he said.

O'Brien was not mistaken. The deadbeats came along in a bunch, twenty of them. They did not take kindly to queues. They jostled their way through the long line of natives who had been waiting since daybreak, six o'clock in the morning. Since the time was now ten, this meant a good deal of jostling. But despite the intervention of the policeman on guard duty, everything went off quite quietly. When at length the door opened they were in front—among them, Gerard, Hans, Luigi, Juan Bimba, Johnny, Pedro, Deloffre, Gomez, Cacahuete, Lewis and even the ineffable Bernardo. One by one they entered the hut where the applications were being dealt with, and after waiting for varying periods were interviewed by O'Brien's secretary.

A clerk entered up particulars of their names, ages, nationalities and so forth, recording so many details as to cause Johnny to remark afterwards that there would be no room for them all on a tombstone. They then filled in a four-page questionnaire and were rewarded with a summons to come back that afternoon.

A number of them had spent some years in that land of oil, and hearing the news of the fire at Derrick No. 16 had put two and two together. They could guess pretty well what kind of work they were to be offered. The ugly thought of nitroglycerine lay like a thundercloud over the castles in Spain that they were already starting to build.

The group of those associated with Gerard in the plan for purchasing the schooner assembled later in the saloon at the Corsario. They all knew the vessel; at one time or another he had taken them all along to have a look at her. And now they began eagerly to discuss the details of their association, their respective duties, the division of the spoils. They saw themselves already on board, already rich. They argued and bickered until Jacques, of whom no one was taking any notice because no one ever did take any notice of him, suddenly got to his feet and shouted:

'Madmen! You're all mad! So you think you're all going! How many of you? Gerard in command, Hans first mate, Johnny to be bo'sun, and Bosco, Luigi, Juan Bimba, Gomez, Deloffre, Bernardo to be crew! . . .' He pointed a finger at each one in turn, causing them to raise their heads, startled and indignant. And to each one he cried: 'Dead! Dead! All dead! . . .'

'The old man's raving! He's as crazy as a coot!'

'I may be crazy, but I know what I'm talking about. I tell you I know! I was on that job myself once, before your time. Half the lorries went up in smoke, did you know that? Fifty per cent, one out of every two! And listen to you, making plans for the future! . . .'

He was nearly in tears. He wrung his hands. His lower lip pouted, thrust forward from his old man's mouth. The others looked sulky, like children rebuked by an angry parent.

'Yes, you can glare at me! You think I'm an old fool, an old babbler. Old! Do you know how old I really am? I'm thirty-eight! And that's what that job did for me—the same job—the one you're after—"dangerous and highly paid work" on behalf of the Crude Oil Corporation. That's what it's done!'

The tears were now welling out of his eyes, and as he raised a hand to his face the sleeve slipped back to reveal an emaciated arm like the arm of a child, withered by fevers, by corruption, by drugs, as though he were in the grip of a deadly, wasting disease.

'Every other man dies, one out of every two. And the ones that are left are as wretched as before—the ones that didn't get the job, and the ones that did. Because what happens to the ones that come back? They've got the fear, the way you get the pox. They've got it in their guts for the rest of their lives! I tell you, there's no pox as bad as fear!'

The others turned their heads away, shocked and embarrassed.

'Well, none of us has got the job yet,' said Gerard. 'We're like a pack of kids talking about a party before we've even been invited. It doesn't make sense.'

'All the same, just because he doesn't like it, that's no reason for putting people off,' grumbled Hans . . .

After all, what is fear? It is not always, or necessarily, yellow or green or white. It can take so many forms. It may be a colourless liquid, without smell and almost without taste.

VI

THAT AFTERNOON they were ushered into the presence of O'Brien in person. He had watched them enter with a slight anxiety, but was reassured when he had had a chance to look them over. They were all younger than he, not one of his generation. He did not know any of them.

He remained standing behind his polished desk, smoking a black, local cigar. Close by his right hand stood a small chemist's beaker, one third filled with oily liquid.

'I take it you boys all understand English,' he said. They looked at one another. There were no Guatemalans among them.

'For once it's a closed shop in our favour,' Gerard murmured in Johnny's ear. 'That's nice, anyway.'

O'Brien blew a puff of smoke and said:

'I wanted to talk to you myself so as to avoid misunderstandings. I need four drivers to take two trucks, carrying a ton of nitroglycerine between them, to derrick No. Sixteen. They're just ordinary trucks, without compensated shock-absorbers or any other special safety arrangements—just trucks in good condition, and that's all . . .'

The group of men listened without much interest, familiar with the American passion for making speeches.

'This is nitroglycerine,' said O'Brien.

He grasped the beaker and raised it gingerly in the air till he held it shoulder-high.

'It doesn't look like much, but it's dangerous stuff. The warmer it gets the more tricky it gets, and round about a hundred and eighty degrees it becomes absolutely instable—meaning, it's just as likely to explode as not. Apart from that, any kind of sharp jolt is liable to send it off. Just watch this.'

Twenty heads were craned forward with a single movement. Holding the beaker at arm's length, O'Brien slowly tilted it. A few drops gathered on the rim, and fell. As they touched the wooden floor a series of sharp, dry reports rang out and a cloud of dust rose.

'Jesus!' said one of the men admiringly.

'That's nothing,' said O'Brien. 'But when you've got half a ton under your backside . . . well anyway, you don't suffer!'

The men laughed. The burst of merriment might have been obsequious, a token of servility; but in the present case it was an expression of genuine good humour among hardboiled men glad to

find themselves dealing with one of their own kind.

'So that's what it's like,' O'Brien went on, gently setting the beaker down on the desk. 'The only precaution we can take is to fill the containers as full as they'll hold, so that the stuff can't slop about. If you drive as softly as though you'd got a new-born baby in the back; if you watch every darned inch of the road, and keep on checking the temperature—above all, if you're lucky, you may get through. I hope you will. I know you're the sort of guys who aren't scared of taking risks. But if after what I've said any of you feels he'd like to quit, he's only got to get up and go.'

O'Brien had finished his cigar. He marked a pause while he lighted a fresh one, carefully not looking at his audience. There were some who stayed merely in order to hear what else he had to say, but at the back a defeatist party had formed. Six men arose and left, among them Gomez, who at the Corsario, a short time before, had been the most enthusiastic candidate for a place in the schooner.

'You won't sail under my command, yellow belly!' Gerard called after him.

'Better that than never sail again at all,' answered Gomez, shrugging his shoulders.

O'Brien resumed his discourse.

'You'll all have to undergo tests, naturally. We're only offering four jobs, and we can't accept anything but drivers of the very highest class —we're risking five thousand dollars on each of these trucks. Anyway, it's in your own interest that we should try you out thoroughly. Just one last thing. You'll be paid a thousand dollars each for the trip of three hundred miles. Once you've dumped your load you can be back here in a few hours. That price is enough to show you that this isn't a Sunday School outing.'

He turned abruptly and moved towards the door, passing in front of the bunch of candidates for sudden death, and jerking a hand for them to follow him. A lorry was waiting outside, a wooden-sided lorry fitted out for normal haulage purposes, but of the same type as the ones to be used for carrying the explosive.

'All of you get up behind,' said O'Brien.

He drove them out of the enclosure. As they passed the Policia, the sentry on duty, being curious, stepped out into the middle of the road with his arms extended, looking like a specimen of the local vulture.

O'Brien slowed and pulled up alongside him. The soldier stepped forward and saluted.

'Where are you taking these gentlemen?' he asked.

'Where I choose,' said O'Brien affably.

He engaged his clutch. The soldier made a feeble attempt to protest, but his voice was drowned by those of the deadbeats in the lorry, who showered abuse on him in his own language.

'No joda! Carajo! Quanto payas, maricon?'

Once outside the town, O'Brien drove on to an expanse of rough open land and then pulled up. He got a list out of his pocket, thrust a pencil behind his ear, and called:

'Pilot.'

A man stood up.

'That's me.'

'Come and take the wheel. You're to drive as far as the hut down there, take a turn between those two rocks, and then bring her back here.'

The man called Pilot climbed into the driver's seat, with O'Brien beside him. He sat well back, waggled the gear-lever to make sure it was in neutral, declutched, just the same, on principle, and then trod on the starter. O'Brien took his cigar out of his mouth and said:

'Don't forget that you're supposed to be driving with a load behind you, that will blow you to smithereens at the slightest jolt. O.K.'

Pilot revved up the engine, but gently, gently, just enough not to stall it. The lorry started to move as slowly as though it were sliding through butter. The men in the back waited for a slip, the slightest jolt that would eliminate this driver from the contest. Presently Johnny, overwhelmed by impatience, or by inspiration, slapped smartly with his open hand on the roof of the driver's cab. It was the signal used throughout Latin America by peasants riding in an open truck when they wanted the driver to stop. It worked. The brakes were jammed hard on, and two tons of metal came abruptly to a standstill, causing the passengers at the back to be jerked forward against the cabin. O'Brien said calmly:

'Well, Pilot, if you'd had the proper load on board you'd now be dead. You can get down.'

The man slammed the door of the cabin, and started to walk hastily and furiously back towards the town, but then turned and cried:

'Sods! You dirty sods! . . .'

It took a little over two hours to put them all through it.

Those who failed badly departed, one or two hanging about till a friend came to join them on the walk back to the town. None came through entirely without a fault—that is to say, without the slightest jolt. The ones who had done passably well stayed in the back of the lorry, waiting feverishly to hear the result. But O'Brien, maddeningly, did not say a word. Finally there were seven left, all with some hope—Gerard,

Luigi, Lewis, Johnny, Juan Bimba, Hans, and, for reasons which only O'Brien knew, Bernardo. Nearly all had suffered from the others. Johnny's trick had given the lead. Cacahuete had been made to jerk the wheel and brake violently by a handkerchief suddenly dangled before his eyes. O'Brien had raised no objection. These devices all added to the value of the test, the purpose of which was to ascertain the quickness of the men's reflexes.

But Johnny and Gerard had a private compact. They were going to put their money together to get the schooner. While one was driving, the other prevented the rest from playing tricks. The only one who might have stood up to the two of them was Hans, who did not trouble. Perhaps like Gerard, who did nothing but watch over Johnny, he found all this a little shabby. Or perhaps he was simply sure of himself.

O'Brien was no fool. He knew very well that there would be bitter resentment when he announced the result. So he had decided to say nothing until he got back to the office. The return to the Crude Oil Corporation's enclosure was a dreary business. The nerves of all of them were on edge. It was just as well that the soldier outside the Policia made no attempt to hold them up. He would have suffered for it, if he had.

At the rear of the enclosure, near the repair sheds, men were working on the two lorries selected by O'Brien himself that morning.

They were standard platform lorries. The tank lorries, all of three tons capacity, were useless for the purpose, since even one of them could not be filled full enough to prevent the nitro-glycerine from slopping about. A rough and ready method had been adopted, probably the best in the circumstances. Steel drums—two to each lorry—had been tightly and elaborately wired to padded wooden trestles, and wedges inserted to ensure that the slightest play was taken up. Several thick layers of wadding covered the platforms. After being filled, the drums in their cradles would be hoisted on to the lorries and securely lashed in place.

Mechanics were now checking the pressure in the hydraulic shock-absorbers which had been hastily fitted to improve the suspension as much as possible. But this was the weak spot. Far more elaborate devices, of a kind which the Corporation did not possess, were needed if the bodies of the lorries were to be so sprung that not even the heaviest jolt would be passed on from the wheels.

O'Brien came to see how the work was progressing before going to his office to announce the names of the drivers he had selected.

'They can wait five minutes, with a bottle of whisky on the table,' he reflected; and he said to the foreman-mechanic: 'What about weight?'

The foreman hoisted himself up from under one of the lorries into the light of day. His shirt was soaked through. He wiped his forehead to stop the sweat running into his eyes, and left a smear of oil down the side of his face. His hair and mouth were filled with the dried earth that had fallen from the underside of the lorry while he toiled with his spanner. He spat and said:

'That's what's worrying me, boss. Two tons is the proper load for these trucks. More than that and they're sluggish, but with less they bounce.'

'Put some ballast on board.'

'That's going to be quite a job. We've got the padding all fixed.'

'Never mind about that. Get more men on to it—they can take extra time off when the job's done. The trucks have both got to be on their way by seven-thirty this evening, and those boys are entitled to know that everything possible has been done for them. You've time enough between now and then.'

Meanwhile time was passing slowly in the Superintendent's bungalow. Hans, Gerard and Luigi stayed seated, but the rest were pacing up and down. One bottle of whisky had not gone far between seven of them, and O'Brien had left orders that when it was finished they were to be offered nothing but fruit juice. He was going to bitterly disappoint three of them, and he preferred to have them sober.

'What does the fat Irish bastard think he's doing?' muttered Hans.

'If only someone would tell me how I got on!' wailed Bernardo. 'I couldn't be sure, myself. But I thought——'

'You got on bloody badly, and now pipe down!'

Lewis, the homosexual, gave vent to a burst of ill-humour. He had no liking for Bernardo, perhaps because the youth's effeminate appearance aroused his jealousy. He said with malice:

'You think you've got a chance, do you? You think you're going to collect the money and clear out, and kiss all the rest of the boys good-bye! I wouldn't count on it, sonny! This isn't a job for pretty little boys, it's a job for men. It'll take guts, do you hear?—guts and character. It's my sort of job, not yours. If one of us two has got to stay and rot in this blasted sewer of a place, it's damned well going to be you!'

'For Christ's sake shut up!' said Gerard wearily. 'We know you're a hell of a fellow. We think you're terrific. But that'll do.'

O'Brien stood watching the electrician who was fitting a red light to the cab-roof of one of the lorries. The Corporation had laid down strict regulations for the transport of dangerous loads. Beside the man who was fixing the leads, a painter, with a handkerchief over his nose and

mouth, was spraying the roof with blood-red paint.

'Watch what you're doing!' exclaimed the electrician. 'No need to go painting me red!'

'Hurry it up,' said O'Brien. 'Martin. Hey, Martin! Mind you inspect the clutches.'

When he entered his office all eyes were turned to regard him. O'Brien thought suddenly of his own youth. He took up his position almost hurriedly behind the desk, pulled a bunch of papers out of his pocket and turned them over, looking for the one he wanted. Gerard murmured in an undertone to Johnny:

'This remind you of anything?'

'What?'

'Perhaps the first time you were condemned to death.'

The Roumanian shrugged his shoulders. O'Brien coughed.

'Which is Juan Bimba?'

The Spaniard started and stared hard towards the desk. He stammered before he could speak.

'It's—it's me. Well?'

The last word came like an explosion, as though he were angry, or as though he were afraid. There was a breathless silence while they waited to discover whether the Superintendent was reading the names of the ones he was taking or the ones he was rejecting.

'You're engaged,' said O'Brien, and with a shuddering sigh Juan Bimba sank back on to his chair.

'Luigi Stornatori?'

Luigi leaned forward in his turn, but more calmly, now that he knew what it meant.

'Johnny Mihalescu.'

Now there were four left, Gerard, Hans, Lewis and Bernardo, and three of them must lose. They exchanged glances of naked hatred during the brief instant before O'Brien spoke again.

'Gerard Sturmer.'

So that was that. Now they knew. The face of Hans Smerloff became expressionless, as though it were carved in wood. Bernardo screamed:

'But what about me? What about me? You've forgotten me! You've left me out! But I'm a good driver, better than any of them. You didn't give me a fair trial. I've got a visa for the States. . . !'

'Pipe down!' grunted O'Brien. 'There may be another chance if—well, accidents can happen. But in that case the first in line is Hans

Smerloff. He doesn't need another test. The other two can go. I want the men I've named to come with me and have a look at the trucks. You'll be starting at nightfall. Smerloff, you might as well come too.'

The ones who had been chosen waited tactfully for the others to leave before slapping each other on the back. Lewis went out shrugging his shoulders. Bernardo stayed to make a last, anguished appeal to the Superintendent.

'I just can't believe you aren't taking me!'

'Sorry, buddy,' O'Brien said.

He was slightly embarrassed. He would have preferred a volley of abuse, or even blows, to this plaintive appeal.

'There's nothing I can do about it,' he went on. 'Anyway, I'm not a charitable institution, I'm the head of this corporation in this lousy country. If you blew up you'd take your team-mate with you and six thousand dollars worth of material, to say nothing of yourself. And from the way you fool with the pedal——'

'What pedal?'

'The clutch-pedal, son. The way you let your clutch in you'd be thin air before you'd even got clear of the town. Now be a good kid and scram. Go back to your playmates and leave this to the grown-ups.'

But the youth still stayed there as though dazed, so that O'Brien had to put a hand on his shoulder and thrust him out of the room. Poor little Bernardo! He had believed in his chances just as once he must have believed in Santa Claus. He made no attempt to wipe away the tears that rolled quietly down his cheeks. But he cried too much. Everyone felt better when he was gone.

They went down to the repair-shed and inspected the lorries, with O'Brien fussing over them as though they were his own children who had all won prizes at school.

'How will you team up?' he asked. 'You'll make your own arrangements, of course. That's your affair, not mine.'

Johnny and Gerard exchanged glances.

'We're going together,' Gerard said.

'O.K.'

Luigi pulled a glum face. He would certainly have had more confidence in Mihalescu as a team-mate than in Bimba.

The lorries were nearly ready. The red paint was drying and beginning to shine on the cabin roofs. There were red lights fore and aft and on the roof-tops, and Martin and his men had ballasted them to bring the load up to two tons, in accordance with O'Brien's instructions. They sat sturdily on the solid cushion of their six big tyres. They looked trustworthy. One after another the four drivers slid underneath on their

backs to study the suspension, which was naturally the matter that concerned them most. But they did not lose sight of other things on that account.

'You've got to make sure that the pins in the cardan shaft are tight,' said Johnny. 'A bit of whip in the transmission, and the whole thing will jitter like hell.'

'And the strops on the springs, back as well as front,' said Luigi to the foreman. 'You've never driven a truck, that's obvious. If the strops aren't properly fixed the whole thing goes like this when it starts to move.' He made a swaying motion with his hand.

'You'll have to try them out,' said O'Brien. 'But first you must draw lots for which pair is to have which truck. That's the fairest way.'

'How about wetting our whistles before anything else,' said Johnny, with a flash of Roumanian pertness. 'I reckon that'd be fair, too.'

The Irishman laughed, pleased by this presence of mind. He clapped Johnny on the shoulder with a hand that would have made a policeman envious.

'Fair enough, brother! This way!'

The Corporation mess was three huts away. They entered in a group, ushered in by O'Brien.

'Double Scotch all round!' he roared. 'It's on the house.'

Hans Smerloff had been present while the inspection was going on. But when they moved towards the mess he did not follow them.

VII

It is perhaps impossible to describe what Smerloff now did, while O'Brien was standing drinks to his flock in the bar, without making him appear an unmitigated scoundrel. Yet this was not altogether true. He was simply a man who left nothing to chance, and who was resolved, at any cost whatsoever, to escape from this land of death where he had already squandered too much of his life. He could stand no more of it! A Bernardo might be content merely to weep at being rejected, but not Hans Smerloff, who had been hardened by so rough a past. One did not stay in the trap when a way of escape was offered, however ugly the means might be. Slav that he was, Smerloff had no illusions about the value of human life; and if this did not suffice he could take refuge in the easiest and bitterest of self-justifications—the death of others. So many had died who had not deserved to die. They were all dead, all the men and women he had loved. Not one was left.

And so his mind was made up. O'Brien had given him only half a chance, but he could make sure that it became a whole one. A little skill and care, and to-morrow or the next day he would go back to Honduras, rich, powerful and respected. Even while he was making his plan he could admire a certain delicacy which entered into it: it was to be carried out before the lot for the trucks was drawn . . .

He looked quickly about him, a glance that might have been enough to betray him if anyone had been watching. But the chief mechanic was talking to another man some twenty yards away, and it sounded as though their conversation was likely to go on for some time. From where Hans stood, beside the left front wheel of the second lorry, he could see without being seen. He moved towards the work-bench and picked up a pair of pliers and an empty tin. The foreman was still talking, and had moved a little farther off. Smerloff bent down with the pliers. A colourless liquid smelling of insecticide drained out of one of the shock-absorbers. Keeping an eye on the foreman, he caught it in the tin, not allowing a drop to fall to the ground. He was a careful workman. When no more came he made everything fast as before. He tinkered a little more with the shock-absorber. He had just replaced the pliers on the bench when the American returned.

After sixty or seventy miles the shock-absorber would seize up, and then . . . well, then there would be a job for the next man. Hans went after the others. He slipped quietly into the mess, but contrived to get away before they drew lots for the lorries. Squeamish! . . .

Linda had kept Jacques talking all the afternoon, and thus knew what was going on. She knew it down to the last detail. Her face was heavy with misery, her features drawn and strained but otherwise expressionless—nothing to be read in them except the fear that froze them into immobility.

She sat alone at a table. One of the Corsario's regular customers came up and spoke to her, but without receiving a word or a glance in reply. Hernandez then approached her and murmured something in her ear. She did no more than move her head slightly and sigh.

'But listen, Linda. He's come here for you.'

She did not answer.

'He'll be furious. He won't come back.'

She got up, still unspeaking, and went into her own particular alcove. Supposing that she had changed her mind, the customer followed her behind the curtain. Their murmured words were audible in the saloon, but they spoke too low for Hernandez to be able to hear what they were saying, although he listened hard.

After a minute the man came out again and strode towards the door, his face red and positively bulging with anger. Hernandez ran after him.

Just a minute, *señor*. You don't want to go off like that!'

'Thanks, I'm not stopping. The bloody half-breed whore won't look at me!'

'But wait—wait! I'll talk to her. Let me offer you a glass of Scotch.'

It was a gesture not to be ignored, even by the wealthiest. The customer took a seat at the bar.

There was a sound of approaching voices. A large party came in, all talking loud—Gerard, Bimba, Luigi, Johnny, and Smerloff and Bernardo, who had waited for them outside the Corporation's enclosure. They pushed through the doors and jostled their way into the saloon.

'Well, we're in!' cried the Roumanian. 'A thousand bucks for a few hour's driving—more than they pay Truman! They've taken Gerard and me. You can pay for drinks, you bloody capitalist!'

'Nothing for us except coffee,' said Gerard. 'We're a team now, and you've done enough drinking for one day.'

Linda had come out of the alcove looking ugly with wretchedness. But before she could go to Gerard, Hernandez spoke rapidly to him. He gazed at the girl coldly.

'Linda!'

She stood still, brought up short by the harsh, metallic note in his voice.

'Look after the customer.'

He spoke quite quietly. There was plenty she might have said, might have cried at the top of her voice, but she stayed silent and helpless. With the injustice which was his privilege, her lord had passed sentence. It was useless to protest. He was too hard, and above all, too distant. She could not even try to hold him back, to save his life; he would leave that night without having listened to a single word of her terrors and her anguish—or of her love for him. She turned resignedly towards the Guatemalan who, perched on his high stool at the bar, had been following the scene with what he hoped was an air of haughty indifference. Her eyes were sombre and despairing, her lower lip trembled. The customer gazed silently at her, and then turned to Gerard.

'Muy agradecido, caballero,' he murmured with a courteous inclination of his head.

He touched Linda on the elbow and drove her with a little gesture towards the alcove, whose curtain, slightly drawn back, afforded a glimpse of the waiting bed . . .

Later on, long after the customer had departed, Gerard in his turn joined Linda.

He drew the curtain across, and she turned to him. Tears welled up in her eyes, although her face was now expressionless, her lips untrembling. But despite herself, despite all her efforts, she could not keep silent.

'Gerard, you'll never come back. It's too dangerous. Everybody says so. Too dangerous.'

'Don't you worry about what the others say—they'd give their ears to be in my place! And I shan't be alone. There's Johnny.'

'Oh—Johnny!'

'Well, what's wrong with him?'

She did not answer, but putting her arms round him pressed her body against his. She looked at him, her face drawn with despair:

'The crueller you are, the more I love you. Oh, Gerard!'

She spoke his name in the Spanish fashion, in a husky, guttural sigh, the G aspirated at the back of her throat. Tormented still by the imperative need to try and restrain him, hopeless though she knew it to be, she went on:

'Gerard, I beseech you not to go!'

'You must be crazy! Do you think this is the first time I've taken a risk, and bigger ones than this? Don't you want to be rich, to travel, to get out of this blasted death-trap of a place? All the other women have

asked me to take them away. You'll be the only one who doesn't want to come.' And he added a lie: 'Don't you want to see my country?'

She shrugged her shoulders slowly, her breasts rising beneath their thin covering.

'Even if you do come back, you'll be like Jacques—you'll have turned into an old man overnight. And even if you're not mad, and you're rich—even then you won't take me. You don't really mean to take me. So . . .'

But Gerard was not listening. He was gazing down at her body. His hands gripped her shoulders, seeming almost white against the red silk that covered them. He drew the folds apart, and the garment fell to the floor. There was a sudden dryness in his throat. He clasped her round the waist, bending her backwards and pressing her tightly to him.

'My *gringo*, my fair-haired foreigner! Linda moaned . . .

But she took no pleasure in what followed. Was it due to her anguish, the fore-taste of death on her lover's lips? Gerard was conscious of her apathy, and there was a suppressed fury in his movements when at length he made ready to leave her.

Neither spoke.

The saloon was exceedingly noisy. Fools from every corner of the town had come to the Corsario to offer drinks to the men who perhaps in a little while would be dead. It was not often that one was privileged to partake in such an event. The heroes, however, stood up pretty well to their solicitations—all except Juan, who might have gone astray if his team-mate had not kept an eye on him.

Gerard fell into conversation with Hans Smerloff.

'Whether you've got any money or not, we'll take you in with us when we get that boat.'

Hans smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

'Thanks, but I'm not so keen on water, especially the sea. Anyway, I'm kind of hoping there'll be a job for me during the next day or two.'

It was Gerard's turn to shrug his shoulders.

'I admit it's a lousy road.'

'Try and make sure you're not the one I replace,' said Hans with a wide smile.

Seated in a corner in front of a glass of rum which he owed to the generosity of the proprietor, the youthful Bernardo was covering a sheet of squared paper with handwriting that might have been learned at a village school. He was having trouble with his pen, which kept on picking up fragments that he had to remove. His letter was as follows:

'Darling Mother,

I've just got a job with a development company in the south. The boss has great faith in me and is putting me in charge. I've got to stay there two years. When I get back I shall be rich.

I've been to see the United States Consul, and he was very kind. He said he would renew my passport. He said they like the Piedmontese very much in Boston and everybody will be nice to us there.

I'm writing to tell you all this because where I'm going the post isn't much good. You may have to wait a long time before you hear from me. When I get back I'll send you passage money for you and my three brothers. I send you love and kisses, dearest mother. I think of you and I feel better.

Your loving son,
Bernardo.'

After adorning his signature with a handsome flourish, he licked the envelope and wrote:

'Signora Angelina Mattore-Salvini,
Via della Speranza,
Domodossola (Italia).'

Then he got up with a deliberate unobtrusiveness. He passed along the tables to the one where Gerard was just concluding a meaningless conversation with Hans Smerloff, the conversation of men waiting for the clock to strike.

Leaning on the back of the Frenchman's chair, Bernardo bent forward and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. Drying saliva mingled with dirt left a dark smear on his skin.

'Excuse me . . .'

'Clear out, can't you?'

'Let him speak,' said Gerard. 'What is it you want?'

'Oh, there's no hurry. When—when you've finished talking . . .'

He went back and sat down again, and in a little while Hernandez came up to him.

'Here,' he said, putting a packet of cigarettes and a peg of whisky on the table. 'From Gerard.'

The boy did not raise his eyes.

'Have you got a light?'

Tobacco and spirits together . . . he had lost the habit of them. He was overtaken by a violent fit of coughing, childish coughing. Indeed, he seemed to become more and more a child as he amused himself with filling his empty glass with smoke. But they were not childish thoughts which weighed so heavy in his head that at length he rested it on the crook of his arm on the table. He seemed to have fallen asleep . . .

'I'm sick of it—sick of it—sick of it . . .'

Presently Gerard came and sat down in front of him. The boy looked up and then turned away his face. He had been crying.

VIII

DARKNESS HAD fallen on Las Piedras, on the beaches and the banks of the river Guyas. In the Crude Oil Corporation enclosure the office lights had gone out, and the lights in the dwelling houses had been switched on all together.

The town was frightened. During the afternoon the news of the load that was to be transported that evening had gone round, and the houses lining the road had been vacated by their inhabitants. Then panic had infected the rest of the population, and there had been a general exodus to the hills. Only a few old people had stayed, shaking their heads and murmuring:

'If anything happens it will be the end of the world. Why should we leave, when it will be the same everywhere?'

They were grouped by the church, where the priest prayed without intermission.

One of the Corporation engineers stood at the entrance to the enclosure denying admittance to all unauthorised persons. Inside the gates, smoking was forbidden.

'Damned silliness!' grunted Juan Bimba, crushing his cigarette against the iron gatepost. 'They said we'd be allowed to smoke on the road.'

But the others did not agree with him, holding that two precautions were better than one.

Gerard and his team-mate, Johnny Mihalescu, met at the gates. Gerard was wearing a pair of grey-coloured slacks, rather like nylon pyjama-trousers, which he kept for special occasions, and a short-sleeved vest wide open at the chest. He had a silver chain on his left wrist, and leather sandals tied with thongs.

Johnny blinked, thinking for a moment that he was dreaming. Gerard was dressed exactly—but exactly, as it seemed, down to the last detail—like his comrade in Tegucigalpa the day he had stabbed him to death. Even the charm attached to his chain, an ugly little Aztec god, twisted and grinning, was the same. The Roumanian felt a new kind of fear, such as he had never known before, creep into his soul.

The first lorry was slow in getting away. The drivers had stayed for a long time waving their arms out of the windows before at length they vanished round the turn of the road. The silence they left behind them was broken by common accord. The little group who had followed

them down the main street, as far as the edge of the town, walked slowly back to the enclosure.

'Well, you see, it's not so terrible,' O'Brien said to Gerard.

The Frenchman did not answer.

Johnny had not come with them, preferring to stay by their own lorry.

'I don't want to see,' he had said. 'It's quite enough for me to have to do it myself.'

The driver's cab was large. Essential provisions were handily bestowed in the net above their heads—cigarettes, matches, loaf sugar, biscuits. Between the two men, in a large haversack, were two thermos flasks containing very strong iced coffee and two flasks of good brandy, padded round by a change of under-garments and jerseys. Being both accustomed to life in the tropics, they were mistrustful, like the natives, of the relative coolness of the early morning.

Pasted to the ceiling was a square of grey paper on which the Corporation's topographical expert had mapped out their route, a dark-red, zig-zagging line which looked like a streak of lightning; and fixed beside it was an elaborate document intended to regulate their procedure, and including a detailed timetable setting forth their periods of rest and the times when they were to relieve one another at the wheel.

'Regulations,' O'Brien had said half-apologetically as he drew their attention to it; and he had muttered something under his breath in which the words 'bloody nonsense' were not inaudible. Gerard decided to throw it away directly they got started, but in the end he did not do so.

'Do I take the wheel first, Gerard?'

Just as you like, pal. Go ahead.'

But they had still to wait another twelve minutes to let the first lorry get well clear of them. O'Brien came up.

'Everything O.K.?'

'O.K.,' said Gerard.

Johnny said nothing.

He got into the driver's seat, touched the gear-lever, put his feet on the pedals, tried out the position of the back-rest with his shoulders.

'We need a cushion. I'm leaning too far back. It'll tire me.'

Gerard got down, leaving the door open to avoid closing it unnecessarily. When he returned he found that Johnny had pulled up his cotton slacks to his knees and unbuttoned his shirt down to his waist. Beads of sweat showed on his temples, and their rivulets glistened on his cheeks. It looked unpleasantly as though he was

sweating with fear.

'Here. Shove this behind your back. That all right?'

'Yes, that'll do.'

Three minutes more, according to the clock on the facia-board. One would have said that everyone there was listening. For the two who were about to set out the period of tension had already begun. The sound of the first lorry had died away long ago. If they were to hear anything of it now it would be quite another sound . . .

One minute to go. Johnny reached out a hand to the facia-board and pressed the black ebonite button. The starter set up a long grinding noise, but the engine did not so much as cough. Gerard, huddled well back in his seat with his feet high in front of him, waited for them to move before closing the door. The cabin was intolerably hot. It would be bad enough even when there was a breeze. Once again Johnny pressed the starter. The battery was new, it functioned admirably; but still the engine did not come to life. Gerard turned a key on the facia-board.

'She might go better with a little juice!'

Johnny did not smile. He was pressing with a quite needless weight on the clutch-pedal, terrified of accidentally engaging his gears, although the gear-box was in neutral.

'Carry on, chum. They're all waiting.'

Johnny drew back his foot with a maddening slowness. He spent an endless time gingerly feeling with the gear-lever for the point at which to engage his lowest gear, which on that model was right forward. The engine was turning over softly, without throttle. With five speeds and an auxiliary gear-box in addition, there was no risk of stalling, but one had to guard against shuddering at the moment of revving up. With astonishing smoothness, like a luxury train, the lorry began to creep forward just as O'Brien opened his mouth to tell them to start. The Irishman jumped on the running board and laid a hand on Gerard's arm.

'Take care of yourselves, boys, and good luck!'

He disappeared into the night. And now there was nothing in front of the red-cabined lorry except the narrow channel of light cut by the headlamps out of a sea of darkness . . .

'Cigarette?'

'Light one for me.'

By the light of a match lit with his finger-nail, Gerard caught a glimpse of his companion's profile. Jaws tightly clenched and eyebrows lowered, Johnny was looking decidedly grim. But the worst thing about him was the difficulty he seemed to have in breathing.

Perhaps now he had something to do he would relax.

'So off we go—up to the neck in it!' said Gerard, with a show of light-heartedness.

There was no reply.

They travelled slowly down the main street. Johnny was in no hurry to change gear, but on that worn roadway, with its ruts, its broken blocks of cement, its shattered asphalt, he was doubtless wise. Worst of all were the black, shining puddles of stagnant water mixed with oil. The Sanitary authorities made perfunctory efforts to fill them in. But one never knew what was at the bottom of a puddle, or how deep the hole was.

Two men and an old woman crossed themselves as they passed the church. The priest made a wide, vague gesture towards them, of benediction or of exorcism. Johnny emerged from his silence.

'Bloody fools! *Me cago en Dios . . .*'

He crossed himself, none the less.

'So you've got it too,' said Gerard.

'Well, one never knows.'

Then they passed the Corsario. All the regular customers were there, or anyway those who had not been afraid to stay in the town. There were half-a-dozen on the doorstep and others at the windows. A voice cried:

'Good luck, lads!'

The others echoed him—Good luck! Good luck!

It was Hans Smerloff who had first called out.

Linda broke away from the group round the door. Unerringly and without hesitating she ran to the right-hand door of the lorry, by which her lover was seated, and walked along beside them.

'Gerard, I didn't want you to go, but—Gerard!——'

He did not answer, and scarcely looked at her. The truth was, he was irritated.

'—But now that you're going I pray for you to succeed. May the Holy Virgin aid you! You are my man, my love, Gerardo!'

She drew nearer and looked up at his sombre face that she loved and saw so unclearly. As he drew on his cigarette a red gleam illumined it from below. It looked very hard.

'And don't trust Johnny too much,' she whispered. 'He's not like you.'

The lorry began to gather speed, forcing her to run.

'Go back now, Linda.'

'God preserve and bless you, Gerard!'

'I'll be seeing you.'

Johnny had gained a little confidence. He declutched, raced the engine in air, and cut out the auxiliary gearbox.

'God bless you!' Linda cried again.

She went on repeating the words to herself as she returned to the Corsario, where an over-excited clientèle awaited her with more impatience than usual.

The lorry, K.B.7, embarked upon the first slopes of the ascent leading to the Zulaco plateau. It was not heavily loaded, and this early stage presented no serious difficulties. Johnny, sure of having a smooth surface beneath his wheels, seemed to become still more at ease.

'Coffee!'

Gerard uncorked one of the thermos flasks, and filling a cup of plastic material offered it to his companion in the darkness. There could be no question of switching on the light in the cab, because of its reflection on the windscreen. Even the bulb lighting the instruments on the facia-board had been dimmed to the lowest possible intensity.

Johnny was slow to take the cup, no doubt because he had not seen Gerard's movement.

'Here!'

But there was no reply. As though their beams were thrown back from an opaque wall of darkness, the red lamps girdling the lorry surrounded it with a fire-coloured halo. Against this ruddy background Johnny's stubborn profile was blackly visible. Gerard's gaze fell upon his hands on the steering wheel. They were tightly clenched, and it was clear that he could not open them. Twice the fingers of the right hand jerked.

'Well, are you going to take the coffee, or have I got to sit holding it all night?'

'I'll have some later.'

Gerard whistled softly and then drank the icy stuff himself, which was ridiculous. All very well to take a stimulant when one had something to do, but when one had only to sit there looking at a chap who was scared half out of his wits—and oneself just as frightened, probably . . .

Fear. . . . It was there, riding on their backs, huge, mindless and oppressive. Fear in the guts, and nowhere to run to. Still, there is one thing one can do to fear: one can refuse to accept it. A special dispensation from the Devil, and one rejects it. So then it waits, just outside the door. It hides in the drum of nitroglycerine, and from there it

watches. It settles down very cosily with that distillation of sudden death, like a couple of cats, a couple of tigers pretending to be asleep while they choose the moment to spring. If the explosive springs first, fear will have been cheated; it will have come too late. But it is there, all right, the true apocalypse, curled up like a great beast with its tail between its legs, waiting, waiting to spring.

To blow up—blow up—the master-word. . . . 'The captain blew up his ship rather than surrender. . . .' Ah, yes, but that was powder. With powder the great thing is not the blowing up, but finding somewhere soft to land when you come down. With this stuff it is the explosion itself that kills—and nothing is left. Where there's a skeleton there's hope; at least there is a human shape. A skeleton, after all, is something tangible, visible, changeable: you can buy or sell a skeleton, or dress it up in clothes. There are dealers in skeletons, for the benefit of medical students. But when there is nothing left—a thin, widely-scattered sludge. . . .

To be trapped like any hero—or almost any hero, for they are rare indeed who can imagine beforehand what it will be like. . . . Courage consists in going on after one has begun to realise . . .

And that was the difference between these two men. No bribe, no offer of any kind could now induce Gerard to give up. This was not his doing, and there was no merit in it. It was like that, and he was like that. It would annoy him to die; but his fear of death was in some degree under the sway of reason; it was a precise fear, leaving all his faculties unimpaired in his struggle to escape the trap. But Johnny . . . Johnny was simply afraid, with the kind of panic that can never be forgotten. It was because he had known fear of this kind, perhaps only once in his life, that Jacques had been transformed into the piece of human wreckage he was.

Johnny still said nothing. He was driving steadily, but there was a nervous tremor in his movements. As they climbed the gradient he seemed to be afraid of slipping back every time he changed gear. Considering the power of the engine, and the lightness of the load, this was absurd. The lorry would have no trouble until they came to the three hair-pin bends half-way up. These were awkward: sandwiched between sheer cliff on one side and its low concrete rim on the other, the road rose very steeply, and the wheel-lock of a heavy lorry was only just enough to . enable it to get round the bends in a single turn.

'Shall I switch on the spotlight?' said Gerard as they came to the first of them.

'No.'

What the devil was he up to? Was he stopping? It seemed that he

was. He leaned to the right as he lifted his foot from the throttle and pulled at the hand-brake—an angry, desperate tug, as though some obstacle had suddenly appeared in their path. The brake held. The heavy lorry, which had started to slip back the instant it ceased to make headway, stopped dead, lurching slightly at the violent tightening of the drums. Gerard's heart seemed to lurch a great. deal more.

'What in hell are you doing?'

'I want to pump ship, that's all.'

Gerard did not believe him. He stayed where he was, listening. And in fact Johnny did not relieve himself. He had simply wanted to stop, either to change over to the auxiliary gear-box or to pass the wheel to Gerard for the difficult turns. He came back to the cab, pretending to button his trousers.

'Mind taking over for a bit? I'm beginning to feel tired.'

Tired after a dozen miles! Gerard slid into the driver's place. The part of the seat not covered by the cushion was slightly damp—lucky it was only sweat!

'Well, get in!'

'No. I'd like to walk a little way, just to stretch my legs. Wait for me when you've got past the bends.'

'Swine!'

Before operating the starter Gerard switched off all the lights except the red ones, which were fed by a separate battery. He switched them on again after the engine started up. Not having his team-mate with him was going to be a nuisance: the movable spotlight was not synchronised in any way with the front axle but had to be operated by hand, used to sweep the inside of the turns so that he could see exactly where his wheels were going—and he needed both hands to steer with.

He engaged his bottom gear, and then found that he could not shift the handbrake. With one foot hard down on the clutch-pedal, and the other holding the lorry with the foot-brake, he wrestled with it. It was immovable. He tugged with furious jerks, struggling frantically to gain the fraction of an inch that would enable him to close the grip and thrust the lever forward. But it was no use. The infernal thing seemed to have seized up solid. Johnny in his panic must have slammed it on with almost superhuman strength. Gerard called to him:

'Johnny! Hey, Johnny!'

The shout was followed by an obstinate silence. Yet Johnny must have heard. He had only been gone a minute.

Gerard swore, translating certain blasphemies from Spanish into French, which made them sound better. Then he got out, and

searching beyond the curb at the side of the road found two big stones, so large that he could only lift them one at a time. He carried them, staggering, to the front wheels, intending to wedge them in under so that they would reduce the backward slip to a minimum when the handbrake came off. And because they needed to be tightly wedged, by kicking or by hammering, they had to be at the front end of the lorry, as far away from the load as possible.

But the problem of wedging them was not simple. Kicking, with his sandalled feet, would be worse than useless, and he had nothing sufficiently heavy with which to hammer them. He stood sweating, picturing that backward lurch when the brake was released. Then he thought of something—the jack. He got it out, and setting it under the front axle started to pump. When the tyres were just clear of the ground he worked the stones into place. Then he lowered the tyres softly on to the stones, which crumbled slightly against the hard surface of the roadway. That ought to hold them!

With the front wheels solidly blocked, he returned to the cab, and removing the front seat altogether, to give himself elbow-room, resumed his battle with the handbrake. The thing was almost unbelievably jammed, It took all the strength of his two hands-forearms, back and shoulders—before, with a convulsive effort, he was at last able to shift it. Having done so, and feeling a slight shudder from the lorry as it settled back against the stones, he promptly clapped it on again, but this time within reason.

'God almighty!'

He sat back without having replaced the seat, utterly breathless, his muscles trembling, his body chilled with sweat although there was not a breath of air. The middle finger of his right hand was torn and bleeding, pinched in the release lever, no doubt, when the handbrake had yielded. He wiped it on his trousers, and reached for a cigarette in the net above his head.

The significance of the episode lay precisely in its insignificance. It was a trifle, less than nothing; but in the atmosphere of that night. . . . And where had that devil got to? There was no sign of him.

'I'll go on without him,' Gerard repeated. 'It's worse than having no one. The dirty sod can walk home!'

But a small voice, not of conscience but more probably of fear, whispered in his ear that this was not true, and that to be quite alone would be the worst thing of all . . .

He flung away his cigarette-end, which gave out no sparks but fell into the darkness as though into a hole. Indeed, there was a hole a thousand feet deep just beyond the lefthand side of the road. Then he replaced the seat, got behind the wheel, and prepared gingerly to start

up again. Having started, he stopped after going a couple of feet and got out to shift the stones, so that the back wheels should not go over them. When at last he really got away he had wasted three-quarters of an hour.

IX

THE FIRST bend was the worst. Whipping tightly round an outthrust of rock, the road seemed to rise almost vertically—the gradient was, in fact, about one in five. In bottom gear, reduced still further by the use of the auxiliary gear-box, and at half-throttle, with the engine roaring none the less, the lorry approached it with incredible slowness: The lorry was like a great, mistrustful and dangerous beast, and the mountain like another beast, bigger and even more dangerous. After sweeping the road, Gerard fixed his spotlight to the right so that it lit the inside of the curve. Swinging out a little to allow room for full lock when he had reached the middle of the turn, he accelerated; this was the moment for the engine to give every ounce of power it had. The wheel spun between his hands. The lorry was like a rebellious, crafty animal that does not mean to go where its master directs, the head rising and falling, the short, stubborn jowl with eyes gleaming into the night, the living creature roaring and grunting and groaning. . . . Tight to the road, tight to the inside wall of rock, the lorry, the beast, seemed to rear and refuse; then finally, weaker than the man, it obeyed . . .

Round that first bend the gradient lessened and the engine raced. Second gear; third. . . . A hundred yards on came the second bend. Then came the last. For the next hour the road would be easy.

Gerard stared down the path of the headlights, looking for Johnny but not seeing him. It was no wonder. He was looking for a man upright, or at least seated; but Johnny had taken the precaution of lying full length in the ditch at the side of the road. The most one could say was that he had not got his hands clapped over his ears.

Gerard pulled up beside him.

'Well?'

Johnny did not answer. A blast on the horn brought him up with a start. He leaned on one elbow and gazed with a haggard face towards the cab.

'I—I fell asleep, I guess. That's what must have happened, I fell asleep. What the hell are you laughing at? I tell you, I was asleep!'

Gerard was laughing without restraint, his wide shoulders shaking in the open window-frame of the door.

'Fancy that! Well, while you were having a nice nap I slipped down to the beach and had a swim.' Then he stopped laughing and said quietly: 'Swine!'

Johnny had at length risen to his feet. As he walked round the lorry

to get in on his side, Gerard started off without him. But he ran and jumped on the running-board, and getting in sat down without speaking. Several miles of darkness swept past the two men, of that darkness that hedges the roads along which all men travel.

'O.K., I'm scared,' said Johnny at last. 'But not you, I take it?'

There was a note of defiance in his voice. His was a self-reproachful cowardice. Gerard did not reply.

'You make me sick, all you blasted heroes! I suppose you're just crazy about being killed! Well, I'm not, my lad! By Christ, no!'

'Then what the hell are you doing here?'

'You know darned well what I'm doing. I'm working my passage somewhere else. But I didn't know it was going to be like this—death hanging over you, likely to get you any second. You think you can dodge it, don't you—the tough guy! You don't feel afraid. You don't feel it on the back of your neck, and up and down your spine! You aren't flesh and blood at all. You're not human. You're repulsive. Repulsive, do you hear? You've got to be some kind of inhuman muck to stand this kind of thing. But I'm not that sort of muck, by God!'

'One of the sensitive kind,' said Gerard. 'Just a bloody prima-donna having a bloody fit of temperament! I'm sorry, but I don't go for it. You'll shut your blasted trap, or I'll shut it for you. Go on—get out of here!'

He pulled up in the middle of the road, and leaning across, opened the right-hand door. Johnny stared at him open mouthed, but without speaking or moving or showing any disposition to get out. Gerard's fury began to subside. All he felt now was that he wanted to be sick. He got down himself, and walked round to the other side of the lorry.

'Are you going to get out?'

The ruddy glow of the lamps concealed his pallor. He spoke tight-lipped, in a low, hoarse voice.

'No. I need the money,' said Johnny in a voice that seemed suddenly to have returned to normal.

Gerard was taken aback. He was not greatly endowed with understanding for others. The Roumanian went on:

'Sorry, Gerard! I must have been mad. I don't know what was wrong with me. Yes, I do know! I've never been so damned frightened in all my life. But I'll get over it; I'll make an effort. I'm feeling better already. You'll see!'

Gerard felt suddenly limp—nerves, no doubt; and his finger was hurting. He shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, you'd better do some driving. I'll take over when the road gets bad.'

He dropped into the empty seat as Johnny let in the clutch. The red

lorry started off again. The red lorry. . . . No doubt about it, this was the red lorry's night. . . .

The lorry was a strange personage with rich possessions—two human beings, a tropical night spread endlessly around them; and in addition to these intimate belongings it had its importance in the lives of other men. There was a whole world of which the red lorry was master. 'To each his turn!' sang the engine below its breath. The red lorry had boots and whip; it could draw blood and sweat from its human slaves . . .

'Good God, I've been asleep!' exclaimed Gerard. 'Well, I'm damned!'

The discovery caused him to feel ingenuously pleased with himself.

As they rounded an easy turn, just beyond the crest of the ridge, the concrete roadway came to an end—just like that: quite suddenly, without the slightest warning. Johnny was nearly caught off his guard. Despite his good resolutions in the matter of self-control he jammed on the brake with an appalling abruptness at the sight of the holes and hummocks rushing towards his wheels. But when Gerard looked at him he met his eyes and grinned, pulling an apologetic face. It was a good sign, and Gerard felt better, reassured to find that he had a man beside him who could still smile. He liked others to be like himself.

'O.K., chum. Pull up and we'll change over.'

But first they got out. Seated at the extreme end of the road, their buttocks on concrete, their feet on the earthen track leading away from it, they had a snack.

'No getting away from it,' said Gerard, with his mouth full, 'if all the boys who wanted this job had any idea what it's really like, they wouldn't be breaking their hearts at having missed it.'

'I'll say! The poor saps! That boy, Bernardo's. going to do himself in.'

'Get out!'

'He tried to borrow my Colt. Like hell I let him have it! Just so the cops could find it beside the body! Colts are one thing they do know about.'

'Do you think he really means it?'

'I gave him fifty cents to buy some rope. I told him types that hanged themselves did at least go out with their heads in the air.'

'Sympathetic, aren't you! Still, now I understand. . . . By God, it's funny!'

'What?'

'He tried to borrow the money from me for a session with Linda. Wanted to have that one last thing, I suppose, before he did for himself.'

'Honest? Did you let him have it?'

'No. I said a word to her, but she wasn't in a mood to listen. Another bit of bad luck for the poor little bastard, I expect.'

They got up, and went and studied the map. They had taken two hours over the first twenty-five miles—and the easiest. At that rate they'd be a couple of nights on the road.

The stretch that now lay ahead was going to be tough. For the next fifteen miles the track was completely in ruins, with holes in it big enough to smash the springs of an ordinary jeep. They would have to take them one at a time, always in bottom gear, with never a touch on the accelerator, letting the wheels forward inch by inch, and feeling for each wheel to sink gently down into the rut and then up again.

Two lazy curtains of night seemed to hang on either side of the lorry. Gerard held the wheel with both hands, gripping it as tightly as Johnny had done, but now one could not say that he was wrong to do so. Fresh beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. There was nothing particular to do except to go gently and sometimes try to prevent the dreadful jolts that beset the front part of the lorry from being communicated to its after-part. It was in one's fingers tightly gripping the smooth wood of the steering wheel that one felt those jerks. Sometimes the wheel started as though it were trying to break free, to force the hands to loosen their grip. These were the moments when one had to hold fast.

There was no easing off, no let up even for an instant. No sooner had one got the front wheels over a bad patch than the back wheels entered it, and meanwhile the front wheels were coming to the next hole. Seated bolt upright, Gerard whistled between his teeth and sometimes craned his head to see better. Sometimes he breathed more deeply, released a long sigh of air and leaned for a moment against the back rest. Then he sat up again and resumed his meticulous labour with the same ironical little tune on his lips.

'Change the record, can't you?' said Johnny. 'I'm thinking it too, but at least I'm not saying it.'

'What?'

'"When you die I'll laugh at you! . . ."'

'Is that what I was whistling? I didn't realise. Let's have the spotlight —over to the right.'

The front wing shone out of the darkness, bathed in light. The track stretched out ahead, fairly level for a wonder.

'Oh, lord! I must be getting tired. I could have sworn I saw a large hole.'

'Stop and rest a minute.'

'No. Give me a cigarette.'

The swaying smoke seemed to bring an element of life into the cab where the two men sat silent and motionless, Gerard too busy driving to talk, Johnny too busy being afraid and trying not to show it.

Each was utterly alone, no hope of any real communication between them. Seated on one buttock, his nose to the windscreen, Johnny glared at the road as though he expected it to spring up into his face while his feet moved on imaginary pedals. It was better than doing nothing at all. But it was hard work not to cry out in terror with almost every foot they covered, and sometimes he did so in spite of himself.

'Watch what you're doing, for Christ's sake!'

Gerard was growing increasingly tired of him, increasingly sickened by this man who could be so tough when there was nothing to be tough about. But he did not show it; nor, for that matter, did he blame him. If anything, he was sorry for him. Apart from this, since the driving called for minute application but no exercise of intelligence, his chief problem was to keep himself from thinking. He had not reached his present age without learning that hope is an enemy. Occasionally, for his nerves' sake, he gave himself a little latitude, allowed himself to picture a wad of notes printed on thick, smooth paper; or the Caobos air-port outside Las Piedras, and himself at the pigeon-hole buying his ticket, suit-case in hand. But then, hastily and fearfully, he washed out these images and sought to bring his mind back to emptiness. Slowly, gingerly, swaying and shuddering, the red lorry crept over the road under his hands. . . .

'There's a smell of fire! Fire! Pull up!'

Johnny had leapt up in his seat so violently that he came near to hitting his head on the roof. Gerard gave him a thump which sat him down again—he had tried to grab hold of the wheel. In God's name, what for? Johnny collapsed heavily into his corner, uttered an absurd little cry, turned the door-handle and jumped. Gerard switched off the ignition, letting the lorry come to rest of its own accord. Then he, too, jumped—and quickly, it may be said.

A first glance reassured him: a wisp of white, strongly smelling smoke was coming up from the left front wheel.

'Johnny! Where have you got to? It's nothing. The bearing must have got a bit over-heated.' Gerard added, when Johnny still did not show himself: 'The front axle.'

He got two spanners and an inspection lamp out from under the driving-seat. The Roumanian came up behind him without saying anything.

'Get the jack, will you. It's only a five-minute job.'

In fact, it was nothing serious. But as Johnny bent down to remove the jack, his eye, roving anxiously over the underside of the lorry, was caught by something else that did not seem right.

'Hey, Gerard!'

Gerard threw away his cigarette with a jerk and came up to him.

'What is it?'

'Look on the other side—the spring. That strop looks loose. Isn't there a pin missing?'

'Where?'

'Down there at the bottom.'

'It looks all right.'

'No, for God's sake! There is something missing! Here, wait a minute . . .'

Johnny hung on to the spring with both hands, and then let go. There was a perceptible swaying of the lorry.

'There can't be much juice in that shock-absorber, either!'

Gerard had crawled in beside Johnny under the lorry. A thin beam of light played over the hydraulic shock-absorber, coming to rest on the drainage vent at the bottom. Two slight indentations were visible on the dust-coated metal cap, undoubtedly made by some kind of tool. Gerard got out his handkerchief, spat on it, and wiped the cap clean. Two bright scratches appeared. The men exchanged glances. For the moment they were comrades.

'Well!'

Gerard loosened the cap a good half-turn. There should have been a steady flow of liquid. One miserable drop appeared, hung and did not even fall.

'And the other side?' said Johnny in a voice of velvet.

But the other side was all right. No sign of interference with the springing or the shock-absorber. The bolt in the drainage vent was screwed home so firmly that Gerard had difficulty in turning it, but when he managed to do so the liquid flowed at once.

It was a case of sabotage. There could be no doubt about it. For a little while both men were silent, scarcely able to credit the evidence. One never comes to the end of villainy. There is always one more scoundrel, a bit worse than the last. Hans Smerloff might well pray that he would never be found out. Those two would not be tender with him.

'Is there any of the special solution in the tool-box?'

'I don't think so.'

'How much does one of these shock-absorbers take?'

'I don't know. About enough to fill a Coca-Cola bottle, I should think.'

'Well, we've got water. That would do just as well.'

'Yes. It ruins the lining in the end, but hell, only if it's left too long.'

They started up again ten minutes later, having put everything straight and examined as much of the suspension as they could without taking the whole lorry to bits.

'All the same . . .' said Johnny. 'All the same. . . . Good God, that any man could do a thing like that! . . .'

'Depends how you look at it,' Gerard said.

'How do you mean?'

'Listen, son. The type who did that wanted the job. That's right, isn't it? He wanted the chance if we blew up. Wanted it, or bloody well needed it, just as you like-wanted or needed the cash. Get me? He was just like us. Like me. Like you. See what I'm driving at?'

'Well——'

'Just exactly the same as us! You're all up in the air because you think you've found an even dirtier swine than you are. Forget it! It's just a question of degree.'

'But, damn it——!'

'There's no "but," brother. I don't know which I prefer, the type who's ready to blot out two men for the sake of the money, or the one like you, who wants to cash in, but leaves all the risk to me and clears out the moment things look tough.'

Johnny, aggrieved, puffed at his cigarette in silence. The lorry continued on its laborious passage over ruts and potholes. Once or twice Gerard tried to change up to second gear. After all, it wasn't very fast—fifteen miles an hour at the outside. But it was no use. The whole thing began to dance, and Johnny, green in the face, bounced from one buttock to the other. In the end Gerard gave it up, and they continued at not much more than a walking pace. The night seemed endless.

X

SILENCE HAD come to rest in the cab, between the two men. It filled the cab as it filled the night that lay heavily upon that desolate countryside. No doubt it was silence, crouched upon their chests, that interfered with their breathing, making it short and irregular. They only spoke of essential matters, of which there were not many, with that load behind them. Cigarettes; the heat; the time . . .

Nunc et in hora . . .

A full moon now lighted the plain ahead of them, its beams shining almost vertically down. It had appeared quite suddenly, God knew where from. It had taken possession of the night, dispersing it in a kind of pallid day to the level rim of the horizon bordering the plateau. The nightmare was now not only in their heads, but all around them. Every hump in the track, every rut and pothole, showed up in pitiless relief, so that as the wheels approached it seemed that they would be biting on carved stone; and an enhanced terror bored into the stomachs of the two men, stiffened their backs, thrust them forward with their noses to the windscreen.

Every pothole surmounted was a miracle; a disquieting miracle, because one never dared to think that it was final, or that it would be renewed. The menacing outline of the next hole became pitilessly clear as the front wheels crept up to it. Gerard raised his foot, which had scarcely touched the accelerator, and put it gently on the brake pedal. The lorry was carried forward, not by the engine but by its own weight as it passed the rim of the hole. Then one had to let it slip down to the bottom, restraining it with the brakes but not letting them grip; and once the bottom was reached, without an instant's delay, one transferred one's foot to the accelerator and drove the big vehicle gently forward again, while its lurching chassis groaned slightly. And throughout this procedure the two men were frightened, Johnny perhaps a little more than Gerard. Both held their breath until it was finished and the lorry on an even keel once more. But a minute later it had to be done all over again.

Their faces were running with sweat as though rain were falling. The drops ran smoothly over their glistening skins, clinging for an instant to the fringe of the hair and then falling straight down from their foreheads to their soaked shirts. Now and again Johnny mopped himself with a big handkerchief. Twice Gerard pulled up, taking advantage of a brief, level break in the chaos of the road. He switched off the headlights, and leaning back in his seat breathed deeply.

'Cigarette.'

The light of the match shone on their two absorbed profiles. All the muscles of his face relaxed, Gerard drew on the cigarette with little nervous puffs, and its glowing end seemed to emphasise the bitterness of his mouth. Johnny smoked too, while a fold trembled at the corner of his lower lip. Both times they started off again without having spoken a word.

Very gradually, but then more perceptibly, the track improved. The timetable, spread above their heads beside the map like the canopy of a bed, laid down an average speed of three miles an hour for the stretch over which they had been passing. They had done eleven miles in three and a half hours, so they were slightly ahead.

The potholes were now less numerous. In a quarter of an hour, if God let them live so long, they would come to what was known as the 'corrugated iron'. It is the term' used for hard-surfaced tracks in those countries. The downpours during the rainy season cover them with countless small gulleys, shallow in depth and very close together. One needs to take them at a fairly high speed, not less than fifty miles an hour, so that the wheels skim over the crests of the ridges and the vehicle travels as smoothly as on a tarmac motor-road. The snag was going to be to reach the necessary speed without severe jittering. They needed two hundred yards of smooth, level ground. Would they get it?

'I've got to hand the wheel over to you now, chum. I can't do any more.'

The lorry pulled up after negotiating a last hole, and the two men got out. Gerard was stupefied with fatigue. His eyes were inflamed and smarted whenever he blinked. His damaged finger was throbbing, and so were all the others, stiffened by the long hours of tightly gripping the wheel. He wiped his damp palms on his trousers. A light breeze had sprung up, causing them to shiver as it drove their soaked shirts against their backs. Gerard took his off and got a clean one out of the bag. But he gave himself time to dry before putting it on, and the breeze felt warm on his bare skin. He stood stretching for a moment with the clean shirt in his hand.

Johnny started to drive like a beginner, only just failing to make the whole lorry shudder as he engaged his clutch. His feet trod gingerly on the pedals as on a quicksand, and he handled the gear-lever as though it were red-hot. The track stretched levelly ahead of them, as reassuring as a main road except for those infernal ridges. The headlights swept the way clear for two hundred yards ahead. Johnny had switched on the dimmed lighting of the facia-board. The speedometer needle hovered between twelve and fifteen miles an

hour. He had got through his first two gear-changes, but there were still three more.

They came to a sandy stretch which seemed perfectly smooth. It would take a violently clumsy wrench at the wheel to set them rolling in the sort of skid that they really only risked encountering at the turns. But there was no turn ahead. The track ran straight as a die, visible even beyond the headlights, a white line shining softly in the night, running straight ahead until it lost itself in the horizon.

'This is it, chum—just what we want! Now you can get up speed for the corrugated iron. Step on it!'

But Johnny seemed not to be able to make up his mind. He trod softly, hesitatingly on the accelerator. The speed rose to twenty-five and thirty. At that speed, in fourth gear, the engine also began to hesitate. If he didn't accelerate still more, and change up promptly, he would have missed the chance.

'For God's sake, are you going to spend the rest of the night in fourth gear? Step on it, and change up! You've got about ten seconds, or you'll ruin it!'

But the chance was already spoilt. The speedometer needle fell back. For an instant the lorry held on in fourth gear, carried by its own momentum. Twice Johnny's hand hovered over the gear lever. He pulled a face. His timid foot imparted two or three feeble thrusts to the accelerator. Then he gave up.

Gerard summoned all his self-control.

'Better stop for a moment.'

The Roumanian pulled up submissively at the side of the track. He cleared his throat and spat out of the window, then turned slowly towards Gerard.

'I can't do it. I'm scared. I can't help it. I'm scared, that's all.'

Gerard breathed deeply, a breath that was almost a prayer. This was no moment for losing one's temper.

'You see how it is,' said Johnny. 'I don't want to be scared. God knows, I'm not getting any fun out of it. I want to get this business over, and collect the cash, and clear out of this country. I'm not giving up.'

'You're not giving up, but you're leaving the whole job to me because you're so bloody scared!'

'Yes. You see how it is. Just now, when I wanted to speed up to get into top, I thought I was going to faint. I was so scared I couldn't move my foot. So what are we going to do about it?'

It took them a long time to decide. They could not continue to travel at twenty miles an hour. Apart from anything else, when one has death piled up behind one's back, one is in a hurry to get rid of it. Nor could

they count on a further stretch, as smooth and sandy as the one they had passed, to enable them to get up speed. Gerard got out of the cab and inspected the ground with an electric torch. Yes, this was where Luigi's lorry had got its running start. The spray of sand flung out by the tyres spread wider and wider from the tracks imprinted on the soft ground, showing the stages of their acceleration. As he passed Luigi had left this token for his comrades who followed. Good old Luigi!

Well, what was to be done? Turn round and go back, and make the running start over again? It would be unwise, not because there was any difficulty about turning, but because in doing so the heavy lorry would be bound to plough up the light soil of the track; and then there might be bumps as they passed over it again at between fifty and sixty miles an hour. Yet it was clear that they had got to go back, if they were to get up speed. It would be a slow business, but in the long run it would be time gained, not lost. To travel smoothly over the corrugated iron one had to go at one of two speeds—about seven miles an hour, or over fifty. But they dared not risk changing from one to the other, once they were on it.

'Listen, Johnny. I'm going to take her back to where the sand starts. I'm going in reverse, dead slow and without looking round. You'll have to guide me. My job will be to keep her going smoothly, so as not to make any bumps or ruts for when we go forward again.'

'But——'

'Don't worry. I'll start her off this time. I'll get her up to the right speed, and when we're going properly I'll hand over to you. O.K.?'

'I'll try.'

'No, chum! It's not a question of trying. You'll bloody well do it!'

The tone of Gerard's voice caused the Roumanian to start slightly. They gazed at one another in silence.

'Don't kid yourself—if the goddamned road wasn't so tiring I'd finish the trip alone,' said Gerard. 'It wouldn't break my heart to ditch you after the way you skipped out when that bearing heated up. But it's too tough. I can't do it by myself.'

'There's no question of your doing it by yourself.'

'I'm glad to hear you say so, although not for the sort of reasons you're thinking of. On the other hand, we can't go bumbling along in third gear, in a five-speed truck, just to keep your jelly-belly from shaking- get it?'

'You've no need to talk like that. You know bloody well I'm no more yellow than anyone else. You've known me long enough. It's just that ——'

'All right, all right, you can skip all that! It isn't a question of how

much of a hero you are. It's just a question of going through with this bloody, goddamned, triple-blasted job, which is tearing my guts out just like it is yours, but which we're banking on to get us out of this stinking sewer of a country. I'd a hell of a sight sooner be driving with the worst scum in South America if it just happened, by a miracle, that he didn't wet his pants every time the speedometer went above ten miles an hour. However——'

'I'm scared. How many times have I got to tell you? It's like an illness. I'm ill!'

Johnny choked in his throat so that he could scarcely speak. His face quivered.

'Ill . . .' he repeated.

'Ill or not, to-night it's a question of going on or going under. The home for aching hearts isn't here, it's back in Las Piedras and there's no branch office. Listen: if I didn't need you I'd have slugged you just now. Do you realise that?'

'I don't doubt it,' murmured Johnny.

'Well, I didn't do it, and that's one reason you've got for being grateful. Added to which, I'm carrying you with me after that money. In this business it isn't the nitroglycerine that matters. That's just a side-issue, a picturesque detail. Do you understand? The one real, true, solid thing in the whole of this bloody silly enterprise we've embarked on is simply the cash. Nothing but that! Comic, isn't it? We're just two types earning the price of a ticket somewhere else!'

'I know. But all the same——'

'All the same nothing. I'm not letting you spoil both our chances just because of your nerves. If the money was at the bottom of a cess-pit you'd dive for it and fetch it up in your teeth, if that was the only way of getting it—wouldn't you? Well, it isn't in any cess-pit; it's fixed to a parcel of sudden death which you've got slung round your neck, and which may blow you to blazes at any second—now, for instance!'

'Shut up!'

Johnny's shout was a whisper, a blast which seemed to rise up from his bowels and must have hurt his throat as it forced its way out. Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

'You're too old to play at ostriches. Now here's what we're going to do. I'll work the bus up to the proper speed, and then hand over to you while we're going. Don't start telling me it'll be difficult-it won't be as bad as walking a tightrope! And then I'll sit down beside you and have a nap. There's nothing else to do. I can't spend the rest of my life tied by the leg to this blasted load of dynamite!'

'Yes, but——'

'No, Johnny. I hope you noticed that I haven't said, "Do it, or else . . ." I'm simply saying, "That's how it is, and not any other way." Whether you like it, or whether you don't like it, you can't alter it. Is that quite clear?' . . .

Johnny got down from the cab. He walked beside the lorry, which moved slowly and smoothly backwards. The torch he carried was a U.S. army model with an adjustable focus. Its beam swept the ground twenty yards ahead. But the diffused light from the beam drew fantastic shadows from every slightest ridge and furrow, and Johnny felt his state of tension increase. The night seemed filled with malice and injustice, allied to the infernal load they carried. Everything was against him and too strong for him, joined in a conspiracy to end his life and scatter him like dust over the countryside.

From time to time Gerard moved the wheel slightly to keep on his course. There was no trouble. The lorry was behaving well. Its back wheels were pulling it steadily over the tracks they had made in coming. This was important. They did not want to lay a false trail which Gerard might mistakenly follow when he was speeding up, and which might lead them into trouble.

They got back at length to the beginning of the sand. This was the moment! . . .

Men under sentence of death have been known to look more cheerful than Johnny did as he got back into his place beside Gerard. While the Frenchman touched the accelerator with a gesture that served only to fortify his own resolve, the Roumanian felt his mouth fill with saliva and wondered if he was going to be sick.

And now they started, both with their eyes staring fixedly ahead. The engine went through its series of crescendos, broken by pauses when Johnny was able to breathe again, surprising silences during which Gerard's left foot rose and fell twice on the clutch pedal in the act of double de-clutching, and then stayed calmly motionless; he was handling his gears with great skill.

Third gear—fourth. . . . Except when it dropped slightly at the moment of changing, the speedometer needle rose steadily—thirty—thirty-five. . . . It had still nearly as far again to go before it was in the fifties.

Forty—and top gear. For at least ten seconds Johnny had forgotten to breathe. Open-mouthed, he stared at the thousand tiny flecks on the surface of the road as they vanished beneath the wheels, and the black night rushing past. Small dust-clouds spun in the headlights, the particles of sand seeming to have been whipped up into a dance in response to the frenzied rush of their progress.

The engine was now going all out. But there was something wrong. With a furious thrust of his foot, Gerard drove the accelerator down to the floor. What was happening? The speedometer needle had come to rest at forty—forty, and not a fraction more! He exchanged a glance with Johnny, who was now huddled in his corner, thrust hard against the back-rest by the pressure of his feet under the facia-board. And now Johnny began to cry out, not loudly, but he cried none the less—a sustained, steady wail on a single note. He could not help himself; it came of its own accord.

But what the hell was it? What was wrong with the blasted lorry? Suddenly a thought came to Gerard, and he shouted at the top of his voice:

'The seal!'

The Corporation was in the habit of fixing a lead seal to the carburettors of its lorries, to prevent the drivers going too fast. Probably no one had remembered this, and O'Brien's mechanics had forgotten to remove it.

By the time Gerard realised it they were within thirty or forty yards of the end of the sand. In the ordinary way they would have taken at least fifty yards to pull up, but he had already started to apply his brakes. There could be no question of going on to the corrugated iron at forty miles an hour. It was the worst speed of all. They had to stop before they reached it.

Harder, harder on the brake-pedal, and yet not too hard! . . . As he pressed his foot steadily down, Gerard seemed to feel in his back, in the bones of his body, the mass of explosive liquid thrusting forward against the walls of the drums—every drop of it seemed to be pressing against his own skin. He felt himself being thrust forward, and the blood beat in his ears. It was not just the effect of braking. It must be fear.

With a dozen yards to go the speedometer needle was still just below twenty. This final deceleration was the worst. If the lorry did not pull up smoothly enough the liquid, driven increasingly hard against the forward ends of the drums, would suddenly be thrust back. An abrupt counter-pressure of this sort was all that was needed to set it off. On the other hand, they needed to pull up before they left the sand. But could they? In fact, they could not.

As they drew near to the hard surface of the 'corrugated iron', Gerard reached for the hand-brake. But gently, three notches only, and their quiet clicks as he pulled in the lever suddenly made him realise that he had all his wits about him. Then, revving up his engine with the clutch out, he prepared to change down to bottom gear. It was not a moment for making mistakes; the engine speed had to be exactly right

for the change. He would then let his clutch in and slowly raise his foot off the accelerator. But the speedometer was still pointing to fifteen, which was too high, as the front wings began to quiver at the first impact of the hard soil.

A series of shudders went through the front axle, seeming almost enough to shake it to bits. If that shock-absorber hadn't been put right! But the suspension was thoroughly good. The jolting of the front wheels was not passed on to the rest of the chassis. It was a nice, quiet, obedient lorry which under Gerard's exhausted hands came to rest as smoothly as though it were on a track, absorbing each separate furrow on the road into its responsive springs.

The pressure on the liquid in the drums behind had also gradually eased; fear loosened its grip.

Now a cigarette was essential. Again they both got down from the cab, and again both were silent. The red points illumined the lower half of expressionless, empty faces. Both looked dirty.

'God almighty! I'm down to a grease-spot!'

Johnny sighed but said nothing.

'Well, it can't be helped, chum—we've just got to do it over again.'

'No! . . . No! . . .'

It was an inhuman cry that came from Johnny's lips, the cry of a trapped animal, of a woman in labour, of a man driven beyond endurance. Gerard gripped him by the shirt and began to shake him sharply back and forth. His damaged finger hurt him. He growled at the back of his throat and tightened his grip until the stuff began to tear.

'I said we'd do it over again. Do you hear, you bloody schoolgirl?'

'No, Gerard; no!'

Johnny's voice was plaintive and absurd, the voice of a child that fears a whipping. Gerard was pale and trembling with anger, fatigue, fear past and fear to come.

'Listen, listen to me will you, you poor, weak-kneed sod! If you go on playing up like this I'll murder you! I'll take you on my back, and heave you on to one of those drums and tie you there. Then I'll go on driving, and as I'm pretty damned tired already it won't be long before we both go up in the air. You're frightened, are you? Frightened! By God, what do you think I am? But it's an offence against decency to be as frightened as you are!'

Once more the lorry was backed to its starting-place. Johnny waved his torch to the rhythm of a censer of incense swinging behind a coffin, a resemblance that struck Gerard so forcibly that he could not restrain himself from laughing and whistling the opening bars of the funeral

march. No doubt the joke was in the worst of taste.

With a yank of a screwdriver they removed the seal, a narrow strip of metal tape which Gerard regarded with disgust as it lay shining in the light of the headlamps.

'Now,' he said, 'I'll just run over the plan of operations again. When we've got well on to the corrugated iron I'll pass the wheel over to you until we come to Los Totumos. We ought to be able to slow down all right on the cement roadway leading into the village. Until we get there you've got nothing whatever to worry about—no ruts, potholes, molehills, precipices, nothing provided you keep going at not less than fifty.'

'And if the engine gives out?'

'There's no reason why it should; but if it does we shall be blown to beggary and it'll be too bad, but there's no sense writing the words and music before it's happened. And just one other thing. I'm telling you all this now so that when the time comes for you to take the wheel you won't need to think it over, or to write home to mother or consult your solicitor or anything else, because, by God, if you do. . . !'

With the seal removed there was no further difficulty. Brought up to the proper speed, the lorry passed on to the corrugated iron without a tremor, and then skimmed over the undulating surface as though it were on ice. Gerard, even more exhausted by this success than he had been by his previous failure, felt the weight of fatigue settle on his shoulders and creep along his arms. His eyelids began to smart more than ever. The wind of their progress whistled through the windows and beat in his face under the raised windscreen, but even this was not enough to keep him awake. Twice he shut his eyes as tightly as he could, and brutally forced them open. But sleep was there, lodged like dust beneath them. He had simply got to sleep.

'Johnny! Hey, Johnny!'

'What?'

'Your turn now.'

As was to be expected, Johnny showed no enthusiasm.

'How are we going to change over?'

'Shove your leg in past the gear-lever and get the tip of your toe on the accelerator while I'm holding down the rest of it. O.K.? '

'Yes. . . . Wait a minute, I'm not there yet. . . . That's all right. And now what?'

'Get up as much as you can, and move over to my side without sitting down. Don't worry about the wheel, I've still got it. You can take it after you've sat down. Anyway, there's no danger. The track's dead

straight.'

Ranged on either side of them, the night came rushing to meet the lorry; but farther off it seemed to be escorting it. The roar of the engine, the wind, the speedometer needle pointing to sixty, steady as a rock . . .

'There! Now she's all yours! Just don't forget that if you slow down we both go up!'

The transfer of control had been effected, and now Johnny Mihalescu was let loose in the darkness to drive in pursuit of he knew not precisely what—a cheque, the price of liberty, or his own death; to drive like a dog with a tin can tied to its tail—but a whale of a tin can!

'Are you going to be all right?'

He nodded. He felt now that he was going to be all right. But it was a feeling that might suddenly change without warning, just as, for that matter, his life might be cut short without warning. The trouble was still there. He had an oppressed feeling, as though his stomach were trying to well up into his mouth.

He settled himself in his place, in his vehicle. So far, it had to be confessed, he had been not much more than a passenger. Now the lorry was beginning to belong to him. He leaned forward and then back, tried his hands in different positions on the black rim of the wheel, then squared himself, holding it firmly by the lower half. He really was feeling better.

It was his turn to be waited on.

'Cigarette, chum.'

He drew three long puffs and then threw it out of the window. Tobacco had a bitter taste that night which he hardly recognised. And although he had nothing to do except to keep the lorry straight, the speed was not conducive to smoking.

A little later he turned to Gerard and cleared his throat. He had something rather difficult to say.

'Hey—Gerard.'

'Well?'

'Thanks.'

'Thanks for what?'

'Well, for not leaving me in the ditch when I let you take those bends on your own. You're all right, Gerard.'

'For God's sake!'

'Yes, you're all right. But you'll see. I'm going to help you now. I mean it.'

'Good!'

Then, while his comrade huddled down in his corner to sleep, Johnny began to hum a tune forgotten since his early childhood.

'Two years I travelled from Ploesti to Giurgiu,
And I earned, I earned, I earned
Twelve golden crowns . . .'

XI

'GERARD! HEY, GERARD!'

Johnny had been driving for over an hour, and for the last mile or so there had been a dust cloud ahead of the lorry. It was not dense and it hung low over the ground; it did not affect the visibility; it was simply a sign that there was something ahead. Something large and travelling slowly, or the cloud would be higher.

'Gerard, for God's sake!'

Johnny was on the horns of a dilemma—on the one hand, the minimum speed at which it was safe to drive the lorry; on the other hand, the fact that this same speed was causing him to overtake a moving object of which he knew nothing except that he was getting closer to it. The cloud was thickening, rising in swirls and billows like the ones which serve as a playground for cherubs on the ceiling of a church.

'Gerard!'

'Hell!' said Gerard, awakening at last. Then he said quickly: 'What is it?'

There was precious little to be seen beyond the headlights. The moon, which a little while before had been shining its brightest, had now disappeared. But it did not take Gerard long to see that they were approaching some kind of emergency. He noted the swirls of dust at once, and then he saw an indistinct red glow just below the horizon. He rubbed his eyes, but there was no mistake.

'It must be Luigi ahead of us. Either he's going dead slow, or he's stopped.'

Johnny's eyes were staring fixedly ahead, striving to pierce the wall of darkness in search of a solid body against which they would smash themselves if they were not careful. Despite himself, he eased up on the accelerator, and the speed fell dangerously—just what must not happen. Gerard's foot came down hard on his.

'Shift yourself!'

Johnny showed a great deal more promptness getting out than he had in getting in. Gerard slipped rapidly past him and gripped the wheel.

'O.K., I'm there. You can let go.'

Still half asleep he put his head out of the window and bathed it in the wind, which at that speed was almost cool. Then he began to puzzle over the riddle. It was like a children's game. If you don't guess

right you lose a point. But a large point!

A deceptive and treacherous thing, darkness. The red light seemed to be getting nearer, but it was not easy to judge distances in those circumstances, in the heart of that huge, utterly monotonous plain.

'Do you know exactly where we are?'

'We passed Number Seven pump a little over five minutes ago.'

True, there were the pumps. Looking partly like punch-and-judy shows and partly like semaphores, they followed the course of the pipe-line, in which they maintained a constant pressure from the remotest oil-well all the way to the mole at Las Piedras.

Sixty miles an hour. . . . That was the all-important thing. They had to stick at sixty until they came to the obstacle ahead, and then that problem would have to be solved. The trouble was that the track had narrowed, so that two trucks could scarcely hope to pass without scraping one another.

Two minutes went by. The red glow became more distinct to their straining eyes. Johnny had his face close to the windscreen, and Gerard had his head out of the window. Their gaze searched the night, striving to penetrate its secret—or secrets, if there was more than one. Suddenly Johnny yelled:

'The headlights are out!'

'All right, you don't have to shout. I switched them off. You can see better without them.'

There are too many stars in the tropical night for it to be ever wholly dark. Gerard could follow the line of the track, which was not difficult since it ran absolutely straight. He shut his eyes for an instant, and when he opened them the wall of darkness set up by the headlights was gone. In its place a heavy luminosity stretched as far as the horizon, through which one could see as though one were wearing over-dark glasses. And the first thing that met their eyes was a cluster of red bulbs seeming to hang in the air at the extreme limit of the plain. Gerard switched the headlights on again.

'We've time to make up our minds. It'll be at least five minutes before we're up to them. A bit of bad luck. If they'd been another half-hour ahead they'd have got into Los Totumos before us.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Try to pass them. At the speed they're going they can pull up. They can get right to the side and leave us a clear road.'

'They'll need to get clean off the track.'

'Let's hope that's what they'll do.'

He brought the klaxon into play, a wail of warning blending with the rush of wind past their ears. Each of the engine's eight pistons in turn

sucked air through the vanes of the strident device. But its first formless and inarticulate bellowings were speedily reduced to a pattern —short—long—short—long—the recognised signal among lorry drivers over those roads, which meant:

'*Cuidado! Cuidado!* Look out! Look out! I want a clear road. I've got to pass!'

Another long blare of warning, to put the fear of God into them, even if they hadn't understood the signal; an endless, deafening blare . . .

'Shut off that bloody trumpet and listen!' Johnny said.

It was now the ear's turn to concentrate, as well as the eyes. The rush of the wind troubled them, and as they strained they seemed to catch the rattle on the underside of the wings of every particle of sand thrown up by the wheels. The cluster of red lights was now not much more than five hundred yards ahead. They were getting very close. But still they could hear no reply to their signal. And the track seemed to be growing even narrower. It would!

Gerard put his finger on the button, about to start signalling again.

'Wait!' said Johnny, laying a hand on his arm.

At that moment Johnny was almost normal, so intent that he had no time to feel afraid.

'Listen! I think . . .'

Yes. A distant, faint, uncertain bleat, like a child clearing its throat. But it was rhythmical, broken with clear pauses. Luigi was tapping out a message in reply. But why the devil didn't he get off the road? It would be more to the point. They were now only two hundred yards ahead.

'What's he saying?' asked Johnny, who could not read morse.

E-S-P-E-R-A. . . . *Espera*. Wait.

'As good as saying it's all up!' muttered Gerard between his teeth. 'Jump for your life, or say your prayers!'

Johnny did not reply, but he did not jump either. His lips moved silently, then he pressed his face between his two open hands while a whiteness spread over it like that of a shroud. The red lights ahead were now reflected on the windscreen. It was a matter of seconds. Gerard gulped several times. Johnny gave a last glance and opened his mouth, resolved to die shouting.

The klaxon wailed unceasingly, with Gerard pressing his finger to the button as though to a last hope. Anyway it was company. He wanted to shut his eyes, and couldn't. He was the type that never really gives up; the sort you have to bludgeon to get them on to the scaffold, the sort who on their death-bed argue with the undertaker about his bill. Luigi's lorry was now not more than thirty yards ahead.

And just at the moment when it seemed to be all over, when none of the four men in the two lorries could reckon on more than a few seconds of life, a dust-cloud rose up from the wheels of the lorry in front and half-blinded Gerard. Damned and doubly damned, he took his foot off the accelerator, pulled back the handbrake three careful notches, touched the footbrake with his sole. But something was happening. The red lights which only an instant before had seemed to be rushing into their windscreen through the pall of dust that hung over them, now seemed . . . yes . . . it seemed that they were not getting any closer! . . . As one came to think of it, it was obvious. Luigi could not have kicked up all that dust if he hadn't been accelerating. Of course! And now he was drawing away!

The dust caught them in the throat, making them both cough. Johnny busied himself with pulling down the windscreen, but the screw was tight and he found it difficult; in the time it took him to do it they could have pulled up, or blown up.

The track was now soft and smooth beneath their tyres. They seemed to be running on velvet, although their speed was steadily falling. If no unforeseen obstacle rose up in their path, out of the night or the dust-cloud, they would be all right.

The track grew smoother still, and seemed to be again changing, becoming firmer and harder. The soft, sandy surface seemed to have given place to something else. Peering down between two billows of dust, Gerard thought he caught the colour of concrete. And so it was! It was concrete! They were no longer in the heart of the wilderness, as they had thought. The flying dust vanished abruptly, revealing a white pathway running over the earth like an unrolled carpet. Ahead of them, at the extreme range of the headlights, they saw Luigi's lorry pass between two hovels of baked earth.

In other words, Johnny had misled Gerard about their position. He could not even be relied upon for a bit of simple information.

'It can't have been pump Number Seven we'd just passed when you woke me up. It must have been Number Six.'

Johnny put on his plaintive face, but Gerard was not given to recriminations when the thing was over, seeing no value in them.

They rode gently into the village in bottom gear. The streets were empty; but here and there, through the open doorway of a lighted room, they could see a family prostrate, or kneeling with their hands to their lips in prayer. Evidently the people knew what was going on, although it was highly unlikely that anyone had rung up to warn them. But throughout the tropical zone, in no matter what country, news travels by strange channels and with a speed whose secret Europeans do not yet understand.

The lorries were now separated by only a few yards. As they reached the market square an arm waved from the window of the first lorry, making sweeping gestures in the red light. It was Luigi or Bimba signalling that he was about to pull up. Gerard drew in to the side of the road and stopped, while the others went on to park in the square itself.

'Hullo, Luigi! Hullo, Bimba!'

'What the devil were you up to?' demanded the Italian. 'Didn't you see the handkerchief we fixed to Pump Six to warn you to slow up? What's the good of there being two of you, if——'

'There weren't two of us just then,' said Gerard. 'Johnny was driving, but I was asleep.'

'What!'

Bimba could not get over it.

'I was a *dynamitero* all through the war and the seige of Madrid,' he said. 'We used to climb up on to the fascist tanks and heave a grenade down the ventilator tube to tickle up the crew. We strolled about under fire with packets of dynamite tied all round us, and a lighted cigarette to touch off the fuse when we threw them. To say nothing of bottles of petrol, but they weren't so dangerous. Towards the end we used to fill brandy bottles with the hell's brew we've got on our backsides at this moment, and when we chucked them we'd have small pieces of tank falling around us like hail. All I'm saying is that when it comes to things that go bang, I've had my share. But as for sleeping in that bloody lorry while it was going—*Maricon Dios! . . .*' He turned to Johnny. 'But didn't you see the handkerchief?'

'How was I to know it meant to slow down?'

'Anything white is a danger signal for everybody who drives on these roads,' said Bimba. 'You always carry a handkerchief, or a shirt, or a sheet of newspaper to leave behind as a warning to anyone who may be coming after you.'

'I didn't know. I've only driven in Europe. Anyway, what happened to you?'

The Luigi-Bimba team had had trouble with an oiled-up plug, and with the engine missing on one cylinder and growing over-heated they had had to give up the idea of reaching Los Totumos without a break. They were then on the corrugated iron, and the problem had been to find a place where they could slow down. Just after passing pump Number Six they had seen a temporary repair station ahead of them. A short time previously the pipe-line had given signs of breaking up at that point, and the Corporation had sent along a fleet of lorries with

piping to re-lay three hundred yards. To facilitate operations, a space had been cleared by bulldozers at some little distance from the road, to which it had been joined by a concrete strip. Luigi had turned off on to this strip and managed to pull up.

While he had attended to the engine, Bimba had fixed the warning signal to the pump. As a further precaution, he had fixed another to a wooden post by the entrance to the strip, because they knew that when they had backed off the strip they would have to go dead slow until they had come to the end of the corrugated iron; the others would therefore have to use the same strip in order to slow up in their turn.

'Well, it's cost me two handkerchiefs,' said the Spaniard. 'How about getting something to eat?'

Dawn was still some hours distant in that latitude where the nights were as long as the days. They went to the *posada* and routed out the inn-keeper, and presently sat down to a meal consisting of maize in various forms, dried meat, and a bottle of *chicha*, also made from maize. But just as they were beginning an old man appeared in the doorway. He was trembling, and his voice shook.

'Go away! Go away, and take your infernal powder with you! I am the mayor of this place. We do not want to have our village destroyed to save the Yankees' petrol!'

'Cheer up, old man! Nothing's going to explode. Sit down and drink a glass of *chicha*. We'll be leaving soon.'

The old man stayed where he was, motionless, his eyes staring. He was very angry, and he was afraid. He said again:

'Go away! Go away!'

'Sit down and have a drink,' repeated Bimba. 'We aren't Americans. I'm Spanish, this chap's Italian, this one's French and that one's Roumanian. But you belong to this country, and you don't like any kind of foreigner, do you?'

'What have the Americans done to you?' asked Johnny.

'Too much,' said the old man. 'They come here and buy the oil; they pay the government, and the government keeps the money. The government doesn't worry about us any more, and we're more wretched and poor than we were before. The *gringos* make us build roads by driving us like slaves, and then they use them for their lorries; and if we so much as take a donkey-cart along them they make us pay. They build schools to teach our children to read their newspapers and obey their orders, and to vote for them and work for them. They pay money to sleep with our women; and after that the women are no good for making love, and they spend all the money they get on dresses and plastic handbags. . . . We hate the Yankees!'

'But they build hospitals and look after you. You were rotten with pox and malaria before they came.'

'Malaria perhaps, but as for syphilis, we were so used to it that we did not even know we had it. Nowadays, with their injections, they make us much more ill than we were before. And that's not all! . . .'

He lowered his voice and spoke confidentially. Bimba poured him another glass of *chicha*. It was his third, but he must have been saturated with the stuff from birth; it seemed to have no effect on him.

'And on top of all that,' he whispered, 'they take our blood!'

'What do you mean?'

'With all the wars they fight, they never have enough blood. So here in Guatemala, which has been at peace for a hundred and fifty years, whenever one of our people goes into hospital they take half his blood.' He gazed solemnly at Bimba, nodded, and repeated: 'Half! Never mind if the man dies!'

The meal was over. The four drivers got up, feeling fortified and relaxed. The order of leaving remained as before: the Luigi-Bimba team would go first, followed at a safe interval by Gerard and Johnny.

'But you're not going all the way through the village?' quavered the mayor, who had followed them out. 'You're not going to drive past all the houses with that infernal stuff? It's always the same story. There are always foreigners mad enough to die for money, but we're the ones that die and we don't get anything.'

The village priest had come up as he was speaking, and now put in his own word.

'You've no right to do it,' he said vehemently. 'There are seven hundred people in this village—women, old folks, innocent children. I adjure you, by your eternal souls——!'

'In another minute he'll be excommunicating us!' cut in Bimba, roughly. 'Listen, father, we haven't blown up yet, have we? It's not even certain that we're going to blow up. For God's sake stop interfering, and let us get on!'

'But you've no right! There's a by-pass—specially made for you. I shall complain to the Corporation.'

'That doesn't scare us. If we blow up in the village there'll be no one left to complain, and no one to complain about; and if we get through you can do what you like with your complaint, the Corporation isn't going to worry!'

But Luigi was Italian, uneasy at finding himself in conflict with a priest. He said:

'What's this about a by-pass? What's it like?'

'It's perfect, *señor*, perfect,' said the priest. 'They sent men yesterday

with bulldozers and a roller to make sure it was all right. It's far better than the village street.'

'Well, we might as well have a look. If it's O.K., no reason why we shouldn't use it. It might be better for getting up speed, and there's another stretch of the "corrugated iron" farther on.'

The by-pass branched off about twenty yards before the first houses. It seemed perfectly smooth and in good order. Following its trace through the uncertain darkness, they could see that it described a wide curve round the cluster of houses. An imperious red arrow pointed to the turning, which the dust had hidden from Gerard as he followed the other lorry in. There was no warning to reduce speed.

'When did you say the men went over it?' asked Luigi, to be on the safe side.

'They came yesterday morning, and they worked all day without a pause,' said the priest. 'The transport engineer of the Corporation had had them sent from derrick Number Five. That is how we knew that you were coming.'

The men considered. Nothing had been said to them about this by-pass, and they did not know how long it was. But presumably it could not mean a detour of more than a few miles, and on a surface that looked as flat as a billiard-table—the ideal jumping-off place for the next stretch of corrugated iron.

The priest continued with his persuasions. The mayor had vanished at the mention of the by-pass, no doubt because he preferred to trust to the other's eloquence. A priest is a professional, after all. And there was something compelling about this cassocked old man; above all in his eyes, which were tender and sad.

'It is not for myself that I am speaking. I am old, and not afraid to die. But these poor people, their homes, their children . . . I have been up all night, praying for their safety. I beseech you to spare them. You are men; you knew what you were doing when you embarked upon this enterprise. But they have had no say in the matter. I beseech you to take this turning, and I will go back to my prayers—this time for you.'

'You can leave me out,' said Bimba. 'I did for too many priests in the Spanish war. I've no use for prayers.'

'*Porca Madonna*—shut your blasted jaw—*farabutto*!' growled the pious Luigi. 'Very well, father. We'll go this way.'

No one had given him authority to speak for all of them; but he was risking his skin with the rest, and that gave him certain rights. No one argued.

'Thank you, my son. I thank you on behalf of my flock,' said the old man. 'God will reward you. I will bless your departure and pray for you

all the way. And you will see, even if you do not believe—fortune will favour you.'

One behind the other, the two monsters backed until they were opposite the turning. No doubt it was the weight of darkness on their girdle of red lamps, the red glow surrounding them, that made them seem enormous, larger than any lorries had ever been. Enormous . . . and their careful, deliberate swayings as they backed a little off the track to get themselves in position to enter the by-pass, evoked a recollection of natural history books with pictures of pre-historic animals too huge for their own strength.

Luigi was driving the first lorry. He raced his engine a couple of times and then eased up to get into bottom gear. With his foot on the clutch-pedal he leaned out of the cab.

'Good-bye, father. Give us your best blessing, for we need it.'

The priest stepped back a pace or two, seeming suddenly very tall. He raised his arms to the sky, and the red lights clothed him in a vestment of purple.

'*Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus* . . .'

He lowered his right hand in a sweeping sign of the cross.

'*Pater et Filius* . . .'

They were listening despite themselves. They were even moved, all except Bimba, who was muttering blasphemies under his breath.

'—*et Spiritus Sanctus* . . .'

'Amen,' said Luigi, and let in his clutch. In the light of the headlamps the white of the track shone almost brilliantly. The glowing red bulk of the lorry moved off into the night.

'You might as well take our bus on to the by-pass,' Gerard said to the Roumanian. 'We'll leave it there and go back and get a bit more rest. We might even get some sleep. I've no doubt the father, here, will wake us in an hour.'

'All you think of is sleep,' said Johnny, getting into the driver's seat.

Gerard was left alone with the priest.

'You aren't going with the others?' the old man asked, with a sudden sharpness in his voice.

'No. We're keeping an hour's interval between the two lorries as a safety measure.'

'But——'

The priest seemed to be on the verge of saying something, but then did not do so. He seemed curiously put out. After a little pause he turned and went away. Gerard paid no attention.

Inspired by God knew what yearning for perfection, Johnny was taking great pains to manoeuvre the lorry to an exact spot at the opening of the by-pass, with its rear almost touching the post bearing the arrow. Although it was lightly loaded, it did not handle so delicately as all that, and he was decidedly warm by the time he had finished.

This took a couple of minutes. But then, as Johnny jumped down and the two men were about to re-enter the village, they suddenly paused and stared. The glow of Luigi's lorry, which had been vanishing into the distance, was no longer so distant. It was growing larger. It was coming back!

They stood waiting for it to come up to them. Perched on the running-board was an Indian holding a sort of placard, a large board with black lettering, attached to a wooden post. Bimba jumped down before the lorry stopped. He was white with fury.

'Where's that goddamned bastard of a priest?'

'Why, what's happened? What's he done?'

'Look at this!'

He snatched the board out of the Indian's hands and thrust it under Gerard's nose.

WARNING!
DEAD SLOW!
BAD ROAD AHEAD!
WATCH OUT!

'That's what the bastard did! He had this moved! He knew damned well that if we saw it we'd drive through his blasted parish, and he was scared stiff for his bloody life and his bloody house and the bunch of syphilitics he gets his money by! Where is he? By God, I'm going to do for one more priest before I die!'

Some of the village men had come up while Bimba was speaking, among them the Mayor, who did not seem unduly horrified by what he heard; but he was so shaky in any case that it was hard to tell. Gerard grabbed him by the arm.

'You're another. You tried to stop us driving through this dung-heap of a village!'

The old man's face was sad.

'I wanted you to give up, that's all. I didn't try to send you on that road.'

'Just the same, you moved the sign, didn't you?'

'No! We didn't do that. It was the father.'

'And you too, you old swine !'

Gerard was shaking him violently, beside himself with rage, but the old man's gaze did not waver. The other villagers drew nearer, wanting to protect him but not daring to raise a hand. One of them, however, supported what he had said.

'It was the father who did it all. There was another notice nailed to the post under the arrow. If you look you can see the nails. He tore it off.'

The rest nodded their heads.

'Yes, the father tore it off. He said that if you read it you would drive through the village.'

'We wanted to go and sleep in the fields to-night,' said another, 'but the father would not let us. His church and his house are just at the edge of the street.'

'And if one of us said anything to you he would pray for his cattle and his children to die.'

'He said we must leave it to him and he would persuade you. But he said he would warn you to go slowly over the new road.'

'"Leave it to me"—those were his very words!'

'Well, and where is the father now?'

But at this they were silent and their faces became stubborn.

'He has gone away. Don't waste your time looking for him. Now that you know how it is we will all leave our houses and you can drive through the village. We'll come back when you've gone.'

The four drivers, however, did not see it that way, least of all the Spaniard.

'Come on,' he said to the others. 'We'll find him.'

'I'll stay with the trucks. Someone ought to keep an eye on them,' Luigi said.

The others went with Bimba.

They did not have to look far. The priest had taken refuge in his church. They found him crouched in the shadow of a pillar.

'Come out of it,' said Gerard.

The Spaniard interposed.

'No! Here! In his own shop. In his Master's house. Perhaps He'll work a miracle and save him!'

The priest seemed to be already more dead than alive. He did not speak a word or make any move to protect himself. With a kick in the chest, Bimba knocked him brutally over on to his back. Then he bent over him, heaved him face down, and gripping him by the ears began to rub his face up and down against the stone floor of the church, using all his strength . . .

'That's enough!' said the Roumanian. 'What good will it do you to kill him? You won't even be able to use your money when you've earned it.'

But Bimba still went on for some time before he could be persuaded to let go. The old man, who had screamed at first, was now scarcely breathing.

At length they left, and Bimba spat towards the altar as they went out. When Luigi, who was still standing by the lorries, heard what had happened he heaved a deep sigh.

'That won't bring us any luck,' he said . . .

If Linda, the native girl, had realised the extent to which she had ceased to exist for the man who was her lover, her master, her casually affectionate owner; if she had known how far she was from his thoughts as he drove his cargo of death through that night, she might have dared no longer to think of him, to go on living in relation to him, even to go on living at all.

Because his wretchedness was in some way akin to her own, she took little Bernardo into her alcove that night; and was the more grieved and mortified when the next day his body was found, hanging and already cold . . .

They drove at a snail's pace through the village, and got on to the track like huge, wary tortoises watching every step they took. Then Gerard and Johnny stopped and waited for the others to get ahead.

The two men smoked in silence. They had been sitting there perhaps half an hour when the thing happened . . .

Gerard was just opening the door to get out and stretch his legs when a huge flash suddenly illumined a sector of the horizon and then seemed to spread throughout the night. An unbelievable light, white as a photographer's flash, for an instant threw into relief every foot of earth, every blade of grass, as far as the eye could see. A momentary white sun seemed to freeze all life with its dazzling, pallid glare. And scarcely had it vanished than the thunder sounded, rolling waves of violence which, having no fold of earth against which to hurl themselves, seemed to reverberate endlessly, jostling one with another. Then the breath of the explosion struck the lorry as though it would twist it out of shape, buffeted the faces of the two men, showered grains of sand on the roof and windscreen, and rushed onward to be engulfed in the depths of the horizon. It was followed by the dull weight of utter silence . . .

XII

JOHNNY LEANED forward with his head bowed over the wheel. He had his eyes tightly closed as though something hostile were trying to force its way into them. He started as Gerard pulled the door to, and said unexpectedly:

'Don't make so much noise!'

They stayed for some. moments without speaking, confronting the event. The nitroglycerine had killed their comrades. So now there were two who no longer waited, hoped and were afraid, and for whom the Corporation's cheque was no longer a dream come so close that one might almost grasp it; two who had retired in a flash from the game and all its chances. How many more were there to be? There were some at least, who would rejoice, back in Las Piedras. Who was next? Smerloff . . .

The name, as it came into Gerard's mind, was accompanied by a sudden realisation. Suddenly he was sure of it. This was the man who had tried to sabotage their lorry. Smerloff! He was amazed that he had not thought of it before. Well! The priest had blessed Luigi as he sent him to his death. Smerloff had cried, 'Good luck!' as they passed the Corsario. Treachery, it seemed, had rites of its own!

They started off. Three or four miles passed without incident. Johnny was driving. He had become lifeless, moving sluggish, heavy limbs. The headlights showed them nothing that lay more than two hundred yards ahead. Both of them, the Roumanian at the wheel and Gerard, who was chain-smoking cigarettes, were thinking with horror of the moment when they would reach the scene of the shambles. The air about them seemed heavy. Their fear had changed its nature. For the moment—certainly it would not last—they were simply terrified by the thought of what they had to encounter. . . . Men who had been living an hour before, with bodies like theirs, with eyes, with voices; and now nothing left to bear witness to their existence. No corpses. It was worse than ordinary death.

Presently the track began to deteriorate. As though it had been struck by a series of squalls, at first widely spaced, it was becoming ridged and scored. At first these patches were no more difficult than the bad part at the beginning, after they had climbed up to the plateau; but the headlights showed that conditions were getting steadily worse. Before long they became terrifying. Johnny was livid with fright. All the confidence that he had seemed to recover during the pause at Los

Totumos had now deserted him. His hands were again shaking; again he fumbled with the pedals and the gear-lever. He passed from moments of paralysing, irrational panic to moments of violent, short-lived effort to recover his self-control, and the lorry felt the effects of his fluctuating moods. Once or twice the fatal jolt was very near.

'Stop a minute,' said Gerard. 'There's no sense in going on blindly at the risk of finding ourselves in a spot where we can't go forward or back. Let's walk a bit and see what it's like.'

With torches in their hands and all the lights lit, including the spotlight, which carried farthest, they set out on foot over the disrupted earth. There seemed to be three zones of upheaval. The numerous shallow holes in the first zone, over which they had passed, had no doubt been caused by flying fragments. They came upon a fragment of a police licence-plate bearing the Corporation's stamp. It must have come from the lorry itself, and they were still a long way from the crater, the site of the explosion.

Then there was a stretch of about fifty yards in which the earth of the track had been as it were concertina'd in wide ridges, which had evidently been produced by pressure below the surface. And the surface had been baked by successive waves of heat and pressure so that its crests and hollows were calcined and hard as rock: a series of concentric circles like stones in dried-up ponds, with other ponds outside them. If it had still been heaving and bubbling it would have been less dismaying than that dead state of cataclysm.

And beyond this the shadowy pit. There it was. It was not deep, not much more than three feet. The burst had been so violent that it had had no time to penetrate. They had been scattered to the four winds, Juan Bimba, Luigi and a six-ton lorry with them—to the winds and the sky and the night.

The bottom of the crater was loose earth, and loose earth the sides that crumbled under Gerard's feet. Johnny stayed above, on the edge of the pit, as though fearing a trap. He was flashing his torch about, examining every fold in the ground; but there was nothing to recall the presence of men except a flats tone bearing a splash of blood.

'Well . . .' said Gerard with a sigh.

But there was no time for funeral orations. The problem was to get by. He climbed up beside Johnny.

'I can't do it. It's inhuman. I can't do it,' the Roumanian said in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice . . .

Gerard, my brother, you must master the urging of your nerves and your weariness; you mustn't kill him. You must again shoulder that inhuman burden of human weakness. Beat him if you like, bully him, shake the breath out of him . . . in a word, be patient. There is nothing

else to do.

Patience, the virtue of the strong . . . It all had to be done over again, the business of getting Johnny in hand, of mixing brutality with appeals to his loyalty, of compelling him, in short, to accept the rules of the game, which at the point they had now reached seemed to be simply to die for the sake of money. Death certainly looked highly probable at that moment; but there are always some who escape . . .

'I told you before, Johnny, and it doesn't amuse me to have to repeat it: it's not a question of whether you can or you can't, or whether it's inhuman or whether it isn't. You're going on, and that's all there is to it.'

'No, I'm quitting. I'm giving up. You'll have to get someone else.'

'A hell of a chance there is of that! With one team blown to shreds and the other half-paralysed with fright, do you think the Corporation would send along anyone else. Do you think they're crazy?'

'Well, what will they do? Give birth to a three-legged duck?'

'What they'll do is to turn us loose and get some of their specialists from headquarters. They'll have just as much trouble with them as with us, but that won't get us our job back.'

'Well, even if I agree, what do you think you and I are going to do? It'll take us the rest of the night, and more, to get past this bloody hole. And an hour after sunrise it'll be hot. We shall get the *maho*, that blasted, glaring heat, blazing down on the drums. This filthy stuff goes up at a ridiculously low temperature.'

'We won't be there to see it go up if it gets as bad as that. We'll be having a quiet snooze a safe distance away.'

'Just like that? In the middle of this bloody plain! Without a tree to tie a hammock to! You must be mad! And what about snakes?'

'My God almighty, what about yellow fever? What about beri-beri and arthritis and mumps and housemaid's knee? Are you doing this on purpose, Johnny? Are you just trying to annoy me? Are you? Are you trying to make a fool of me? Answer me, by God, or I'll break you to bits!'

It was Gerard's turn to give way to nerves. But his crisis was at least less degrading, an outburst of simple, uncontrollable anger. He had had too much to bear altogether, too much for one man in the course of one single night. He began to slap Johnny across the face with wide, swinging blows delivered with all his strength. The Roumanian made no attempt to defend himself. After a while Gerard shone his torch on him. His nose was bleeding and one of his eyes was swollen, but despite the blows he was still pale. Calmly and methodically, as though he were administering a course of medical treatment, Gerard went on slapping him, and did not stop until his arms began to weary.

'There. Now let's get on with the job.'

Johnny snorted a couple of times, and sneezed. To his astonishment he felt much better. They went back to the lorry.

'The thing is to find a track through,' said Gerard. 'We'll work it out together. But first of all I'll move the lorry on a bit.'

He took his seat at the wheel, and went on talking through the open door.

'I'll take it nearer to the, crater. That's not the hardest part. We'll see what it looks like by the light of the headlights. The sides of the crater slope pretty gradually. Perhaps we can get the bus down one side and up the other. . . .'

Half an hour later two figures of grey earth might have been seen moving in the luminous pathway cut by the headlights out of the darkness. Dust-clouds played around them, rising, falling, dancing in the light. They breathed dust, they swallowed it and spat it; there was always more.

With naked torsos under their garment of dust and sweat, they plied pick and shovel with heavy gestures. They were building a pathway for the lorry, two ramps by means of which it might descend smoothly into the crater, get a hold at the bottom, and climb out on the other side.

It was not a question of choosing the best of several solutions: there was no alternative at all. The accident had naturally occurred at the worst possible place. For a mile or so behind them and ahead of them, the track was embanked several feet above the level 0. the surrounding country, and it was flanked on both sides by pipe-lines, which being lower had escaped damage from the explosion. From their point of view, this was regrettable. The two snakes of metal piping formed an impassable barrier. The lorry must go straight forward along the track, or not go at all.

The pick and shovel work, which had been a relief to them, was presently finished. They returned the tools to their places on the running-board, beside the doors. The night had grown no lighter, although it was now nearly four: the sun rose all through the year at exactly six. Suddenly it would be daylight, without any dawn. But the temperature had perceptibly fallen, and for the present this was agreeable to both men. In another hour they would be cold. Another hour . . .

'Let's get cracking,' said Gerard, getting into the driver's seat. 'We've got to be across by an hour after daybreak.'

'If everything goes well we shall do it in ten minutes.'

'Did you say "well"? *Well!* . . . Don't you know the word doesn't

exist?'

He operated the starter. The engine began to turn softly with a slight whistle, getting a better mixture in the cooler air. Johnny went a few paces ahead, then turned and walked backwards, facing his team-mate. He steered him with simple gestures, which Gerard's hands and feet obeyed almost before he was conscious of understanding them. Sometimes Johnny raised a hand to stop him, both hands if it was urgent, and turned to examine the stretch ahead, to satisfy himself that the lorry was on exactly the right course; then he turned back to face Gerard. At moments he looked as though he were thrusting away space with one hand or the other, putting the night air back in its place: a slight turn was indicated. Then he would make a circular motion, like a washerwoman rinsing a cloth before picking it out of a stream, which was the signal to go straight ahead.

The way was appallingly rough, despite the work of clearance they had done. But Gerard was driving with great skill, so softly and with so much precision that the wheels seemed to thread their way between the holes, and if the springs groaned from time to time, there was at least no jolt to cause him to knit his brows as he did in moments of real danger.

Stop! The front wheels had reached the top of the ramp which they had built on the near side of the crater.

'You'd better get out and look it over for yourself,' Johnny said.

Valuable though the guidance of a man on the ground was, it was not enough in itself. The driver needed to study every detail of the track, every treacherous patch, every stone out of place; he needed to know every possible snag by heart. Johnny could only serve as a reminder. Not only Gerard's brain, but his hands on the steering-wheel, his feet on the clutch and the accelerator, every cell in his body had to play its part in tackling the task which lay ahead. Once he started there would be no time to ask his mind for orders: everything would be a matter of instinct and reflex.

Inch by inch he studied the path, sometimes bending and touching the soil with his hand. He seemed almost to sniff and taste it. After a long interval he stood upright and murmured to himself:

'I see.'

'You haven't looked at everything,' said Johnny.

'Why, what do you mean?'

'It's no use thinking you can get down to the bottom for a start, and then stop and examine the rest of the way.'

'Why not?'

'Because the bottom of the crater isn't hard—it's soft and squashy. If

you stop you may not be able to start again.'

'You mean, I'll sink in?'

'Obviously.'

'Oh, Christ! Oh, God almighty! Isn't there a single snag, just one tiny little snag on this whole blasted trip that we can avoid?'

Plainly if he was going to have to negotiate the entire crater without a pause the whole business would be a lot more difficult. It would not be simply a matter of knowing the downward slope by heart, a matter of ten or a dozen yards, and then studying the next stage, but of tackling all three stages at one go—down, across the bottom, up the other side-altogether more like forty yards. He would have to learn it all, take a deep breath, cross his fingers and start off—probably to find, at the end of half a minute, that he had forgotten everything, with a good chance of being held up, unable to go forward or back, with the lorry sinking up to its axles in the newly-turned earth, and everything to be done over again and a whole day wasted.

'But. . . . Isn't there anything else to be done? Are you sure the bottom's really as bad as all that?'

'Try it for yourself. Try jumping and you'll find you sink in.'

Gerard drove in his heel, and his shoe became stuck so that he had a job to pull it out.

'But, good God, it wasn't like this when we were working! What in hell's happened?'

Johnny ran a finger round the imprint left by the shoe, and then sniffed it.

'Oil,' he said.

'What?'

'Smell . . .'

No doubt about it; it was the sweetish, sickly smell of petroleum.

That being so, there was nothing to be said. It was no use cursing God. The two men were silent.

The breeze had freshened. Gerard was the first to shiver slightly. No more sweating for the time being. He moved away a few paces, mechanically continuing to photograph the track in his mind. Then he came back to Johnny.

'One of the pipes must have been hit by a fragment and punctured. I suppose it would be a miracle if something of the kind hadn't happened. The stuff must have been seeping through underground all this time. Considering the rate at which it's probably running out, with twelve pumps keeping up the pressure in the pipe, it won't be long before the bottom of the crater's nothing but a pool of oil. We'd better get started while there's still a chance.'

'You're mad,' said Johnny. 'You're stark, staring, raving mad. You ought to be locked up.'

'Listen——‘

'No, you listen to me! Up to now I've gone along with you, because I had to admit that you'd got guts enough for two men even if I was sick with fright. But this is where I get off. I won't play. You aren't a hero. You're a schizophrene and a paranoiac and a bloody idiot, and now you know!'

'You don't even make sense. Up to now, as you say, you haven't been precisely terrific, but just the same you've kept on going with enough stuff behind you to blow up half the bloody parish. And now, from what I gather, you want to give up just because of a blasted oil leak. Which of us two is the idiot? And what's more, you're standing there smoking a cigarette with the stuff seeping up all round you! What the hell's biting you, anyway?'

'It's not the oil I'm scared of. It's the sign.'

'What?'

'The sign.'

The word evidently meant something to Johnny, but it was impossible to get any more out of him. The sign . . .

'Well,' said Gerard at length, 'I'm not going to spend the rest of the night here—so far as there is any rest of the night. I need you to guide me. Are you going to do it?'

The Roumanian looked straight at him. His face was serious and composed, so far as it could be seen. He stood with his back to the headlights which, on the rim of the crater, sent their beams above the hole in which they were standing.

'Listen, Gerard. We've been good pals up to this hellish night. We've had some fun together. Between the two of us, we didn't give a damn for anyone or anything. That's so, isn't it? But now it's finished.'

'Hurry up and get this over,' said Gerard.

'I'll go with you this last time. We'll try to make this blasted hole, even if we drown in it. What will probably happen is that the exhaust will set the oil fumes alight, and we'll either blow up or be grilled alive according to which happens first. It's about as certain as anything can be. But even if we do get through something else will go wrong. I'm going with you because you've been my pal, and because you scare me. You're too much in your element in all this infernal business—I think you must be the devil. As for me, I shall either go mad or die of fright. But remember this, Gerard—I've had a sign, and I've warned you. It can't end well for either of us.'

'Thanks! When I'm looking round for a soothsayer I'll give you a ring.

Meanwhile, how about getting on?'

XIII

THE LORRY stood waiting to proceed with its accursed load. Gerard gazed one last time towards the promised land beyond the crater where the road was clear. He drew a deep breath, breathing in as much of the cool night air as his lungs would hold, and then let in his clutch. The front wheels assailed the earth at the top of the slope, forming a little ridge which they promptly surmounted; and like a stubborn mule with its four feet thrust out the lorry began its descent into the crater. The engine, turning over slowly, held it back. No question of de-clutching until they had reached the other side, and just as much brake as was necessary.

'Oh, my God! That's done it!'

The engine had stalled. With wheels locked the lorry continued to slide downwards, a helpless hulk . . .

A frantic pull on the self-starter and it came to life again; a roar as Gerard trod hard on the accelerator, a slackening as the clutch slipped in, and once again it exerted its power over the inert mass of the lorry, just as it was coming to a stop. The steering-wheel made two violent turns under Gerard's hands, the front wheels again began to bite into the sticky earth, and once more everything was under control.

Dancing in front of the headlights like a puppet on a string, Johnny laboured backwards through the oily mud, urging the vehicle on with wide gestures of his arms. Still keeping in bottom gear, Gerard gave it all the gas he had.

The engine roared like a beast in pain, pistons, tappets, cam-shafts, connecting-rods, all the power that the designer had built into it barely sufficing to drive the massive, cumbersome vehicle forward in a steady progress, no faster than a walking pace, through the viscous, black, sticky morass which squelched sluggishly, without splashing, up to the rims of the wheels.

The oil was flooding in faster than they had expected. The bottom was a nightmare. Johnny, still moving backwards, skidded and staggered like a figure in a dream; and as in a dream he slipped and fell on his back. But it was no dream, since a cry did not dispel it. He shouted and shouted again, scrabbling frantically with arms and legs to get to his feet on that gluey surface which seemed to half cover him; and while he lay there the lorry bore implacably down on him.

Gerard had seen everything, but he had not moved his foot on the accelerator. Nothing mattered except to get through. He saw Johnny still lying there, partly hidden by the wing. He heard him scream.

Ignoring him completely, he kept his eyes fixed on the upward slope which he would shortly have to tackle. He had to get through. There was nothing else. He had to get through.

Somehow Johnny managed to struggle clear. Somehow he was on his feet again. His left leg which must have passed under a wheel, was streaming with blood, but it was evidently not broken.

The lorry's momentum took its front wheels a little way up the further slope; but just as they were on the verge of reaching firmer ground the rear wheels span wildly in a pool of oil, and without a tremor the whole thing sank backwards.

In the sector of the horizon opposite the column of smoke from the burning well-head, the sun began to rise.

Filthy and haggard, eyes hollow and mouth dry, Gerard got down from the cab. Johnny was standing a short distance behind him, with stinking slush smothering his legs. He climbed painfully up to the dryer ground, shedding drops of thick, black liquid. He seemed to have been bathed in oil; it even plastered his mass of wavy hair flat on his head. Looking bald and obscene, he came limping towards Gerard.

'I didn't mean to stop,' said Gerard, who was trembling with fury at this latest set-back. And he went on: 'Now what are we going to do?'

Johnny seemed to be not greatly interested in the problem. He was pulling off his clothes, tearing the thin cotton stuff as he did so. His shoes had been left behind. Standing naked, he examined his wound. His leg was swollen, bleeding and very painful. It seemed in places to have burst like an over-ripe plum. But it was not easy to determine the extent of the damage; the whole thing was enveloped in a coating of oil to which patches of earth adhered. He moved towards the door of the lorry.

'When we can spare the time I'll go over you and help you to clean yourself up,' said Gerard. 'But just now we've got to think about getting out of here. The oil's rising, and soon the sun will be getting hot. Apart from all that, you probably won't be much use in another hour's time, and I'm going to need you.'

The look Johnny gave him was an endless cry of pathos and misery. It was wasted on Gerard, who did not even notice it. He was too angry and too tired. In any case, at this juncture he had no room for two ideas. There could be only one idea—to get through.

'Yes,' he went on. 'You've had a nasty knock. You'll probably be feverish in an hour. We mustn't waste any time.'

The oil was rising steadily. Beneath the liquid carpet which had almost reached the bodywork at the back, the lorry seemed to be

resting on its chassis. Gerard knelt down to investigate, plunging in his arm up to the shoulder. But his arm was not long enough. He drew a breath and immersed his head as well, an unpleasant business.

No, there was nothing to be done at the rear. One would have to fill in the bottom of the crater with concrete, and even then . . .

He was gripped by a paroxysm of the wild, insensate fury which in men of his kind is at once a virtue and a failing. They are like children crying for a toy; they must instantly get what they want, they can never wait. The need to get the lorry out of that quagmire before the full heat of the sun struck upon it meant more to Gerard than life itself. It was a kind of religious frenzy that possessed him; a measure, if one pleases, of his virility—or better, of his vitality—but utterly irrational.

He thought of all the devices he had ever heard of, all the tricks he had ever learned in a career of lorry-driving which extended from the crumbling grassland trails of Venezuela to the craggy slopes of the Andes. He considered each in turn, and rejected them. Such equipment as he had—picks and shovels, ropes and crowbars—seemed perfectly inadequate. What was wanted was a winch. At Las Piedras they had trucks with four and six driving-wheels, equipped with cable-drums fore and aft, driven by the engine, to deal with bogged-up roads in the rainy season. But who could have foreseen that they would find themselves in this situation at the height of the dry season?

The air was growing warmer. Across the still-tranquil sky, as yet untroubled by the waves of heat which would presently rise up from the earth, a flock of green parakeets passed, screeching. They must have come from the great forests of Pariato, far to the south. Their cumbersome but rapid flight was taking them to the sea.

Johnny was seated huddled on the ground, with his back against one of the front tyres. He was obviously in great pain. The onset of fever seemed to be even more rapid than Gerard had predicted. His eyes, darkly encircled, rolled wildly and were assailed by sudden tremors. He tried to call out, 'Hey, Frenchman!' but breath failed him, and it was some time before he could summon the strength to make himself heard.

'Gerard! Hey, Gerard!'

'Shut up!'

'For God's sake, come here!'

Gerard came towards him growling.

'I'll attend to you presently. Can't you leave me alone for five minutes?'

'Listen. I shall be delirious before long, and then it'll be too late. Is

she sunk far in?'

'Up to the springs. Well?'

'I can tell you what to do. But will you promise to dress my leg at once, if I tell you?'

'Directly we get out of this hole. I said I would.'

'No. At once. With all the muck I've got in it, this wound'll turn gangrenous in no time—and then the sun, on top of everything.'

'What's this idea of yours?'

'Promise you'll look after me, Gerard. Promise! I can't die like this!'

'Or any other way. I know. Well, what is it?'

'It's a trick the drivers use in the Roumanian oilfields, where you sometimes get a mess like this. It never fails.'

'Look, are you going to tell me the whole history of the thing, or are you going to tell me what it is?'

'You'll dress my leg at once?'

'Oh, for God's sake—all right!'

'Well, listen. . . . Oh, God, how my leg's hurting! . . . You sink the two crowbars in front. But not just anywhere—they've got to be dead in line. That's the whole secret.'

'In line with what?'

But the Roumanian was suddenly silent, as though he had fallen asleep. His head fell forward.

'Johnny! Hey, Johnny!'

Gerard darted into the cab and seized a flask of brandy. He gripped the injured man by the hair, pulled his head back and slapped his cheeks hard. Then he thrust the neck of the flask between his lips and poured the brandy into his mouth. Johnny choked, breathing some up through his nose and swallowing a little. A mixture of brandy and bile dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He opened tear-filled eyes whose gaze he could not control. It was all Gerard wanted.

'In line with what?'

'What? . . . What line? . . . What are you talking about?'

'You said, "You sink the crowbars in line . . ." And then you dried up. What did you mean? In line with what?'

Johnny reflected, wrinkling his forehead and causing a little rivulet of oil to run down his temple. When he spoke again his voice had grown weaker, and quivers of pain passed over his face.

'It's too difficult to explain. . . . You—you'll manage. . . . I can't think straight. My—my head's going one way, and the rest of me another. What . . . what was I saying?'

Gerard gripped him by the shoulders and tried to shake him, but his

hands slipped on the oily skin. Johnny fell over on his side.

'What have I got to do?' shouted Gerard, bending down with his lips to his ear. 'What—have—I—got—to—do?'

'My leg hurts! For God's sake, do something for my leg! I can't . . . I can't . . .'

'*What have I got to do?*'

'You fix ropes between the double wheels at the back, and you haul up on the crowbars. But they've got to be dead in line, you see—dead in line . . .'

Johnny fainted again. Gerard propped him up once more against the tyre. Then he went and fetched the crowbars, and carried them forward five or six yards beyond the front buffer.

Johnny opened his eyes once more, and seeing his companion busy gazed down at his wound, which had been neither cleaned nor covered. He said nothing, but began to cry. The tears glittered and rolled down his oily cheeks. He tried to call to Gerard, but felt himself slipping back into the void, and after a brief struggle abandoned the attempt.

'Presently,' grunted Gerard as he passed him on his way to fix the ropes to the back wheels.

There was precious little time. The oil was now almost level with the platform at the rear end of the lorry; in another hour, if it continued to rise, it would have reached the front wheels. The back wheels were entirely submerged.

Once again Gerard drew a deep breath and plunged into this mire. The oil penetrated into his ears and up his nose, making them smart. He had great difficulty in keeping himself under.

In his right hand he had a length of stout hempen rope. Wire cable could never have been induced to bind on the drum formed by the inner sides of the twin rear-wheels. The devil of it was that he had very little rope, not much more than twenty yards, which had to be cut into two lengths, one for either side; and the length of the lorry, from the back-axle to the front buffer, was just on five yards.

He thrust his free hand between the double wheels, searching for the holes in the inside hub-caps, between which he could wedge the large knot at the end of the rope. Then, with his lungs bursting, he had to come to the surface.

Feeling round for the bit of rag he had hung on the side of the lorry for the purpose, he wiped his eyes. The oil had burnt the lids, and to open them was almost intolerably painful. But the pain was relieved by

the tears to which it -gave rise, and after a few moments his only discomforts were the oiliness of his skin and the sickening taste of naphtha in his mouth.

His breathing became easier. Shuddering with repugnance, he went down under the lorry again. He had to take his time over it, doing the job quietly and calmly as though he were working in the open air. There was no room for haste.

The metal shields on the wheels, the tyres, everything that he touched was slimy, and everything felt the same beneath his fingers. No grip or touch was sure. When he came up to breathe again, believing that he had got the rope solidly wedged between the hubs, it came away into his hands at the first pull. Twice more he tried, and twice more failed. He decided to rest five minutes before trying again.

The sun was now bright and high in the sky. Above the surface of the pool of oil the first waves of heat began to be perceptible in the trembling air. Gerard went to the cab, and leaned in to look at the time: it was a quarter past eight. Before long things would be getting dangerous. He gave up the idea of having a rest and went back to work, ignoring the groans of Johnny, whose wound was beginning to putrify in the sun.

This time he managed it, and having solved the problem had no difficulty with the other side. In ten minutes the work on the back-axle was finished. All that was necessary now was to lead the ropes forward and attach them to the crowbars, which had to be sunk well into the ground. They had to be dead in line, Johnny had said—meaning, presumably, dead in line with the spaces between the double rear wheels. This was not difficult: on those lorries the back wheels were considerably wider apart than those in front.

Nor did the sinking of the crowbars present any problem. Gerard dug holes with the pick, checking their position meticulously with the ropes, which when they were extended had to pass between the insides of the rear sets of tyres, and the outsides of the front tyres, without touching either. Then he drove the crowbars into the holes, and packed them tightly around with stones. It only remained to hammer them well home.

The heavy sound of hammering aroused Johnny. He looked at his comrade with a gaze of unutterable reproach, well knowing that it was useless to call out, since nothing he could say would make him pause. He looked at his wound. The inflammation was spreading up his leg, and there was now a throbbing in his groin. He explored it with his fingers. A large, painful swelling was beginning to form. Johnny was frightened. He had not really thought that it could go so fast. He tried to raise himself, but his utmost efforts only caused him acute pain and

served to emphasise his weakness. A faint, plaintive groan escaped his lips.

The two crowbars were now sunk into the earth with only a couple of inches showing above ground. Gerard made the ropes fast with two turns and two half-hitches, taking great pains to ensure that the length of slack was exactly equal on either side. Then he hammered the crowbars further home to tighten up the knots. He stepped back to look it all over. It seemed all right. There might perhaps be slightly more pull on one side than on the other, but not enough to matter.

Bending over Johnny, who was again unconscious, he slipped an arm under his knees and the other round his shoulders, and lifted him up. The injured man's head lay limply against his chest; he half-opened his eyes, and his lips parted in something like a smile. He muttered a few words in Roumanian, which Gerard did not understand. He deposited his burden gently at the side of the track, and then took his place in the lorry.

This was the moment. Gerard reviewed in his mind everything that Johnny had said before he fainted. In principle, it ought to work. The exhaust was submerged in oil, and this was all to the good: only the oil-vapour was dangerous, the liquid itself being practically non-inflammable. Any spark that emerged would be promptly extinguished, so that at least there was no danger in starting up.

He operated the starter, and almost at once there was a loud bubbling sound from the exhaust gases which almost drowned the noise of the engine as it softly turned over. Everything now depended on the letting in of the clutch. Gently, very gently, Gerard drew back his foot on the pedal, and as the discs smoothly made contact he saw the ropes tighten.

The heads of the crowbars began to tremble slightly under the growing strain. The lorry moved. The miracle was happening. Almost imperceptibly the wheels were moving up to firmer ground. Looking down through the open doorway, Gerard could gauge their progress inch by inch, while beneath the bubbling surface of the oil-pool the hempen rope coiled smoothly between the hub-caps on the drum formed by the insides of the driving-wheels. In a sudden glow of triumph he seemed to see a carpet of dollar bills spread out in front of the lorry; but at the same time he was simply and quietly happy because he had succeeded.

The back wheels were beginning to bite on earth—and it was high time, because the right-hand crowbar was working loose. Scarcely had Gerard realised the fact than there was a loud report.

'This is it!' he thought, and knew he was wrong, even as the thought flashed through his mind.

What had happened was that the crowbar, pulled partly out of the ground, had suddenly buckled so that the rope had slipped off. The lorry had swung violently off course, and the tightly-stretched rope on the other side had been brought sharply up against the tyre of the outer driving-wheel. The tyre, smothered in mud and oil, was still spinning on the edge of the hole, and the sudden, intense pressure had caused it to burst. And now the whole lorry seemed to shudder as it wavered between continuing its ascent and slipping back into the morass.

With his foot on the accelerator, Gerard sought frantically for the best engine-speed to help the wheels, at the same time wrenching on the steering wheel to correct the course. And suddenly the racing of the engine became quiet and orderly. The lorry had made up its mind. Turning a little to the left and moving at a steady pace, it pulled itself up out of the nightmare of mud.

XIV

IT WAS time to rest, but there could be no question of resting. With one more obstacle overcome, new and pressing problems raised their heads—Johnny above all.

Gerard could not pretend to have an easy conscience where his team-mate was concerned. It was with great gentleness, and armed in advance with patience, that he began to clean the skin round the wound.

The oil adhered terribly. He had to use some petrol out of the lorry's tank in order to finish the job—not an ideal method, from the point of view of infection. And when the wound was entirely disclosed it was Gerard's turn to be alarmed.

The skin was greatly distended, red and shiny and blue-veined. A zig-zag split in the flesh ran the entire length of the tibia. It looked appallingly deep, and the bottom, welling with pus, was already turning green.

There was, needless to say, no first-aid equipment on board. No one had envisaged any kind of accident except an explosion. Well, since there was no surgical spirit, brandy would have to do instead. When Gerard scratched the bone with the little blade of his knife, Johnny uttered a long scream.

Then there was the wheel with the burst tyre to change—a simple routine matter, but Gerard was by now so exhausted that he could scarcely keep on his feet. The mere business of getting down a spare wheel and rolling it into position alongside the wheel it was to replace took him the better part of half an hour. He got on better with jacking up the wheel, but unscrewing the bolts called for nervous energy as well as strength; and then the business of lifting the spare wheel and slipping it on to the axle, some seventy or eighty pounds of metal and rubber . . . this took him three attempts, and in the end he only managed with the help of a tyre-lever. His head was swimming. A red curtain of blood floated behind his lids when he closed his eyes. By the time he had finished it was close on midday.

He had it fixed in his head that he must move on at once, although owing to the intense heat his mind was scarcely functioning. The tops of the nitroglycerine drums were now so hot that he could scarcely keep his hand on them. It was a question of the precise temperature at which the stuff blew up, and the quantity which needed to reach that temperature in order to produce an explosion. But sheer fatigue and

lightness of head prevented him from considering the problem very closely. Moving like an automaton, staggering with weariness, he went towards Johnny. Getting him on to his shoulders was not going to be a simple matter. But there was nothing else to be done; they had to move on.

The sun, now at the zenith, beat down on human heads as savagely as it beat on the roof of the cab and the drums of explosive. It is not fashionable in the South American republics to wear a solar topee: anything recalling the still lively memory of the colonial period is viewed askance. In any case the sun was less severe there than in Africa. Nevertheless, dropping with fatigue as he was, Gerard would have been grateful for anything, even a bowler hat.

Johnny's leg was turning gangrenous.

It was fortunate that the smell of oil kept the mosquitoes away, otherwise the blue, swollen flesh and the malodorous discharge that oozed through the improvised bandage would have been smothered with them. As Gerard bent down to put an arm under the unconscious man's knees, physical revulsion caused him to recoil. Johnny was no longer master of his body; he was bathed in urine and excrement. Afflicted suddenly with a profound feeling of desolation, Gerard gave up for the moment, and went and sat down a little way away.

He thought of the things he might be doing—rigging some kind of cover over the drums of explosive, and then watering it; putting as much distance as he could between himself and the lorry, against the probable explosion; or just finding something to put on Johnny's head; or just sleeping. . . . Get up, man; get up! . . .

Time passed. . . . It was easy to say, 'Get up!' There was no longer just one sun in the zenith; there were three or four or a dozen beneath his eyelids that began to whirl round the instant he closed. his eyes. Large splashes of darkness sped down the red curtain of the sky, falling in a stream to earth. It was a characteristic warning of the onset of sun-stroke. He must get back to the lorry, douche his head and then lie in the shade—which meant, underneath the nitroglycerine.

He got up and passed his hands under Johnny's armpits. His muscles had grown sluggish, and his joints stiff. It was all he could do to keep his hold. A dull throbbing ran from his injured finger up his arm to his shoulder, and then seemed to spread over his breast. Even his heart seemed to be caught in the waves of pain.

He dragged Johnny backwards, regardless of the damage done to him by the rough and stony ground. The bandage was rubbed off his leg, and shreds of congealed blood and flesh were added to the trail they left behind them. But it could not be helped. Johnny, too, must be

got into shelter out of reach of the blistering rays that were burning him alive, or he would certainly die.

Gerard's blood seemed to scald his veins and arteries. After years of being burnt and burnt again by the tropical sun he no longer felt its heat on his skin, but it was as though vitriol were scourging his brain and his lungs. Every muscle and tendon seemed to have become a steel wire sawing his body from within. As he reached the lorry he began to feel in the palms of his hands and at his finger-tips the ominous sensation which, as he well knew, was a definite indication of sunstroke. He let himself fall to the ground and crawled between the back wheels. Then, by slow degrees, capable of little strength but obsessed by his single immediate desire, which was to save Johnny, he dragged his inert body beside him into the shade.

Reason no longer controlled his actions. Indeed, it may be said to have deserted him from the moment when they reached the crater. His passionate resolve to get through in spite of everything, and at once, regardless of anything prudence might suggest, was in the nature of a blind compulsion, a force stronger than reason in a man of his kind. Lying in the shadow he kept his eyes fixedly open, knowing that if he shut them imaginary suns would appear, more dazzling than reality. Careful to think of nothing—above all, to think of nothing—he concentrated upon controlling his breath so that it came in a calm and steady rhythm.

Steadily and without waste of effort he gathered together such strength as he had left. As soon as he was able to do it he would have to dart to the front of the lorry, unhook one of the canvas water buckets hung on either side of the cab, bathe his head, and get back into the shadow to cool Johnny's temples. There would be a very short period during which he would be capable of such activity. He dared not let it pass, because within a short time it would be over and he would be stricken by heat apoplexy.

The moment came. Gerard gathered up his limbs with a feeling, such was the hold of sun and heat upon his mind, that some were missing. Painfully he got on all fours. His head was swimming a little but not too much. He emerged from the shadow. But when he tried to stand upright he was incapable of doing so. Half kneeling, dragging himself along, he fought his way towards the water . . .

There exists in South and Central America an altogether astonishing variety of monkey, no doubt a relic from the remotest eras of pre-history which by some whim of nature has survived to the present time. It is known as 'the Lazy One.' The Lazy One is the size of a *sapajou* with the same neat and well-proportioned hands and feet, the same soft fur, but without its alert face. Its expression is one of permanent

stupor. Its grimaces and even its gestures are characterised by an incomprehensible slowness. It takes a minute or more to raise a hand to its mouth. When danger threatens it a long instant passes before any trace of fear becomes apparent on that face of almost human suffering. At last the Lazy One turns to flee; but its sense of urgency is revealed only in the immense deliberation of its movements, and its progress continues to be afflicted by the same absurd and inhuman lethargy. It appears the incarnation of those nightmares in which we are pursued by a terror which, despite our most frantic struggles, we are unable to escape. In this fashion did Gerard make his way towards the water.

When at length he got back to Johnny he found the Roumanian breathing with difficulty, his short irregular breaths broken by interminable gaspings in his throat. The water seemed to do him good, and his breathing eased; the gasping crises of suffocation, which seemed as though they must cause his heart to stop beating, became less frequent. He partly regained consciousness, but he had forgotten where he was. He uttered a sentence in Roumanian, then seemed to translate it into German, then into English.

'Call me with breakfast at half-past nine.'

Poor Johnny, he was in a strange hotel!

Gerard had got back his wits, but this did not make things easier. On the contrary, he was reminded suddenly of the load beneath which they were sheltering. What was the critical temperature, and what quantity was needed? . . .

Not to know: not to be able to ask a question: to be reduced to the wild and helpless speculation of a prisoner held *incommunicado*, knowing nothing of when his hour will strike. . . . Gerard lay and speculated--perhaps now; perhaps in five minutes or in an hour; perhaps never. . . . Perhaps at the very moment when he was pronouncing the word 'never'. . . . But that way lay madness. It was a thousand times better to face the jolting of the road.

'I must get on,' he said aloud.

A sudden fury possessed him as he thought of what this entailed. He would have to drag Johnny over the ground again. This time he must at least put something on him, so that the rough surface did not go on tearing his flesh. And then, somehow or other, he would have to get him into the cab. . . . A thought, a notion, stirred at the back of his mind. . . . But no; it was something he could not do . . .

He made a mental list of the movements he must make, trying to get them in order. He must prop Johnny against the running-board. No. First he must put some clothes on him. Then he must drag him out, then lean him against the running-board. Then he must stand on the

running-board, grip him under the arms and hoist him up. . . . But he could never do it! No—no—no! It was too much! It was more than could be expected of any man. It was unjust—the whole thing was unjust! After the way he had behaved one could not even think of Johnny as of a friend! . . .

Gerard shrugged his shoulders and crawled slowly out of the shade . . .

But at the moment of letting in his clutch he found that he had to stop. He got down and returned to the Roumanian, who was lying in the sun by the back wheel like a dead man.

He never knew how long it took to get clothes on Johnny, drag him round to the front and hoist him up. It cost an effort that racked his entire body and set the blood beating at his temples with blows that seemed to split his head. Incredible that a half-starved outcast should weigh so much! Still, in the end it was done and he was there, a heap of suffering flesh on the floor of the cab. Gerard lacked the last spurt of energy to get him on to the seat.

As the lorry came to life he suddenly perceived, with a dull amazement, that the sun had completed its circle over the plain. Dusk was upon them, and in a quarter of an hour it would be dark. But what had happened? When had he slept? Where had time got to, under that pitiless sun? Then he realised that at least one victory had been gained: the day had passed, and the cargo had not blown up.

At this thought the future once again opened up before him, as though embodied in the distant pillar of smoke rising from the flaming oil-well. Gerard's heart began to beat with a new rhythm. And suddenly night fell, swallowing up the screen of dark cloud overhanging the sector of the horizon towards which the lorry was heading. The dome of the sky became uniformly black, so that one might well suppose that chance alone had decreed that no stars should shine above their destination.

In theory all the worst was over and the victory complete: but in theory only. It was still dangerously early to open the flood gates and let loose the flow of hopes and dreams. Certainly there should be no more serious obstacles ahead. There was nothing to be done except to go gently without taking risks. At a steady five or six miles an hour they could cover the remaining distance comfortably during the night, and, as a safety margin, there would still be the two hours after sunrise during which the heat would not be dangerous. Whatever happened, even if he felt smooth, level ground beneath his wheels, he must not attempt any higher speed. To do so would be madness when it was not imperatively necessary. In any case, Gerard was in no condition to

drive at a higher speed. The most he could hope to do was to push painfully and slowly on for the rest of the way.

Queer things were taking place in his head. There were moments of exaltation during which he caught a first dazzling glimpse of the happy outcome of this enterprise. He saw himself stopping the lorry for the last time a hundred yards away from the oil well, getting out and leaving the door of the cab wide open behind him. He saw himself strolling away, but filled with a secret haste, while others ran to take charge of his deadly merchandise, and the first-aid men occupied themselves with Johnny. . . . But then, as though something had clicked in his head, he was back on earth again, still driving over the plain with death behind him. His thoughts became increasingly difficult to control.

The lorry nibbled away the miles with its tranquil, sluggish gait. The fire was now plainly visible at the far end of the plain. Tall and brilliant bursts of flame were to be seen spurting up out of the earth, but only at rare intervals, when a swirl of smoke discovered them. At other times there was merely a huge red glow mingled with the black folds like mourning robes that the fire flung up, as though to hide the gateway through which the winner of this contest must pass.

But decidedly things were not going well in Gerard's head! How believe in the possibility of triumph when no evidence of triumph was at hand! What could it be but a dream whose tragic awakening had not yet declared itself, but must be there, must be coming! . . . His temples were damp. He searched for comfort and found none. One click followed another in his head. Details of the roadside appeared out of the darkness in the path of the headlights and then vanished. Well then, the lorry was still going! It was not yet over. Surely that meant that he was still winning! Sleep and the delirium of sun and utter exhaustion were mingled in his thoughts and in his eyes. Sleep and delirium had chosen him for a battleground to settle a private quarrel. No use telling them to go away; they would not understand.

A driver's reflexes, if they are the fruit of a sufficiently long and varied experience, may continue to function even when consciousness scarcely exists. Gerard drove on in a half-sleep, lulled by the slow speed and the effects of the sun. It might have been better if he had fallen asleep altogether. His foot would have slipped off the accelerator and he would have come to a stop. But he could not stop. He must arrive in the morning. In the morning or never.

The lorry seemed to stretch its great body over the slight roughnesses of the ground, rising and falling a little at the ridges, bestriding them with its huge, black, hard and yielding tyres, which it

seemed to gather beneath it and then thrust forward again with the methodical movements of a vast and cumbersome animal. In this way did their progress appear to Gerard's dulled consciousness. Between a man and the vehicle he drives there is, so to speak, a range of common sensations. When a driver makes a false move, skids, perhaps dies, it is due to a lack of sensitiveness. But in these days men no longer have any real sensitiveness. They know how to weep: but how to feel? They have no heart left for it.

'I shall pass out in another minute!'

There was no more coffee in the thermos flasks. Brandy could do no good; it would make him more sleepy than ever. He was alone and unaided in his battle against sleep. He had to defend himself, not let himself be tricked by sleep's devices. He must not be led astray by the world of illusion which sleep was painting all about him on the black curtains of the night. . . . The woman born of the eddying column of the fire, the woman who came towards him, heavy-eyed, with obscene, alluring gestures, she was a phantom, she did not exist. And if she existed she could only be death. That was what he had to realise. Perhaps it was enough just to realise it. Once he had put her in her proper place as a mirage, a picture without reality, perhaps he might welcome her, provided he kept his hand steady on the wheel and his foot steady on the accelerator.

It was better not to accept her at all, to refuse all dreams, visions, phantasies; to shake the head, blink the eyes, and look unwinking down the path of the headlights . . .

But the woman was stronger. He had not seen her open the door of the cab, yet there she was, seated beside him, with her feet on Johnny's body lying motionless on the floor. She had no face, and yet was beautiful. As she drew on her cigarette her mouth was curved as though in a caress, a smile of pleasure savoured in advance. Yet she had no mouth either. With a violent mental effort Gerard drove her away, back to the flames from which she should never have emerged. He put his foot on the brake—careful; not too hard! The lorry came to a stop with a perceptible shudder. He rubbed his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. He felt along the seat for the packet of cigarettes, and found Johnny's hand gripping it so tightly that he could not remove it. Well, there were others in the net above his head . . .

When he started to drive again the woman returned. She had still no face, yet strove more and more to beguile him.

'Take your feet off my friend!'

The absurd phrase spoken aloud, absurd no matter how you looked at it, did not awaken Gerard, although that is not to say that he was asleep. There were two men seated in his place, that was all. There

was one who drove the red lorry sanely over its long, rough course; who was frightened, clear-headed and careful; who did what had to be done without inspiration but faithfully; who saw the track ahead, the monotony of the plain, and in the far distance the pillar of smoke rising to the sky and billowing around the burning well. But there was another who ignored all this, continuing blindly, accompanied by two dead creatures on his journey through the night—a man who had been his comrade a long time ago, at least an hour ago, but who had been dead, as it seemed, for many years; and a woman who persisted in having no face, but who was beautiful in spite of this, and was probably death itself.

'My name is Anne,' she said. 'I want you.'

The distant column of flame was growing brighter. Reflected against its screen of smoke, its light was rising sufficiently high into the sky to illumine the earth. But the red beams carved strange shapes out of the shadows. Other creatures were born beneath the lorry's wheels, but fortunately had no time to acquire substance. The wheels passed over them and they were left crushed on the road.

The woman had laid her hand on Gerard's thigh. It was very soft; he could feel its warmth beneath the stretched stuff of his garment. The steady murmur of the engine seemed to be filled with words, forbidden words that had troubled him when he was young . . .

Gerard the driver went on competently doing his work. The speedometer-needle pointed unwaveringly to seven miles an hour. The wheels span softly and steadily over the track, as smoothly as over butter, leaving scarcely a scurry of dust behind. Gerard the driver did his work without effort, leaving the other Gerard free to indulge his phantasies . . .

Curious that he should find himself slipping back so far into his youth! The woman called Anne was now turned towards him. Perhaps she had been naked all the time. He could not remember. But now all her nakedness was there, breasts and belly and white thighs. He seemed to be reliving the first time, the first woman, the first young experience; and an old, familiar disillusionment when presently the dream ended and the figure was gone. The two Gerards merged once more into one, with their eyes fixed upon the road, a little out of breath, a little disconcerted also. They agreed that they were very tired.

Gerard got another cigarette out of the packet above his head. The glow of the match lasted long enough for him to see that the Roumanian on the floor was no longer breathing. A dying man always needs to clutch something. For Johnny it had been a packet of Lucky Strikes.

Slowly and cruelly the night swallowed up its seconds, its minutes, sparing him nothing. Sleep dug its nails into his eyelids as though it would draw blood, but no blood flowed. Perhaps he had no blood left, just as the body beside him had no life left. The dance of the shadows grew more treacherous, as did the dance of the fire that lay ahead.

The light became more intense, dazzling, almost blinding. He began to think at every moment that he had arrived, and to stare eagerly about him. But the time was not yet. The lorry continued on its drowsy way. Voices sounded in his ears, voices of greeting and of welcome, but they were not real. Even worse, the flame, which for hours past he had seen so clearly, the flame grew pallid, and then vanished altogether. A greater darkness enveloped him. He did not at first realise that the dawn had broken, and that the murk in which he was plunged was that of the smoke billowing forth from the fire. At length, through an eddy, he saw the figures of men coming to meet him. They were waving their arms wildly to signal to him to stop. But he did not believe it until one of them, jumping on the running board, gripped him by the elbow.

'So you made it, boy! Well done!'

XV

SLEEP. . . . A brutish sleep, crushing out thought, almost crushing life itself. Hour upon hour of sleep without dreams, without movement, heavy as death. Gerard lay as though weariness had added a weight of its own to his unconscious body, bearing down upon every inch of it. From time to time the least sigh passed his lips, and then he plunged again as though in haste into this heavenly extinction of sleep.

The tent had been set up a couple of miles away from the place where the men from the Corporation had hastily erected a sort of hangar for the storage of the explosive. The sun beating vertically down on it filled its interior with amber light. The heat within was stifling. An electric fan stirred the hot air with its silvery blades. Little rivulets of sweat ran quietly down Gerard's skin.

While a team of men occupied themselves with the unloading of the lorry, three natives were casually digging a grave for Johnny Mihalescu.

'Six feet deep!' grunted a big negro, putting down his spade while he mopped his forehead.

'When it's one of us they reckon a handful of sand's enough.'

Johnny was there too, but not yet stretched out; merely lying in a heap under the khaki sheet which was to do service as a shroud. The journey and the terror both were ended for Johnny; the sign he had seen had been speedily fulfilled. At least his body had not been left to be the prey of carrion birds, but would be delivered to the earth as in his own land.

The sun would soon have disappeared. Gerard continued to sleep in the tent, released at last from the threat of the nitroglycerine. He would take no part in the obsequies of the man for whose death, when all is said, he was responsible.

These were due to take place at nine o'clock, and the newly-appointed engineer in charge of the wellhead, searching his living quarters, was growing agitated because he could not find the prayer-book. It was not in the cupboard or the chest of drawers. Where the devil. . . . But the word was hardly a suitable one. He found it at last in the medicine chest behind the rows of drugs, and, leaving the door of the hut to swing to behind him, walked briskly towards the burial place.

Once again it was as though the fire had swept the sun over the horizon. It was master of the plain and of the visible world for the rest of the night. Its obstinate and powerful roar filled the silence, leaving little margin for human speech.

Two men were tugging at Johnny's limbs in an effort to get him into a more suitable posture. The rigidity of the corpse, together with the gangrene rotting the flesh, made it an unpleasant job. They muttered under their breath as, from time to time, they turned their heads away.

Standing with his back to the fire the engineer in charge turned over the pages of the prayer book.

Two of the grave diggers stood behind him holding torches of straw soaked in oil which shed a flickering light. There was no wind, but occasionally an unaccountable eddy of smoke drifted over them, causing them all to cough.

'I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live . . .'

A small group of men stood listening, technicians, first-aid men, native labourers brought in to replace those who had been killed by the fire. As each phrase ended the Catholics among them crossed themselves and hastily murmured, 'Amen.'

'We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.'

A torch wavered and went out. A man at the edge of the group of listeners turned away and went off coughing.

'I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours.'

Two of the *peons* stuck their torches in the ground and began to shovel sand into the grave, where it fell silently on the naked body wrapped only in a shroud. Stepping to the graveside the engineer in charge added a short prayer of his own.

'O Lord, we confide unto Thy mercy the body of Johnny Mihalescu, whom we did not know. Perhaps his life was one of evil-doing and iniquity, we cannot say. But he died in carrying out the task he had undertaken to perform, in doing what he had to do. And surely he died humbly and without pride. Receive him therefore, O Lord, into Thy house.'

The others echoed:

'Receive him into Thy house. . . .'

'And you couldn't pull up in time?'

'He was close into the side and I didn't see him fall. Anyway, I was so tired . . .'

'I see.'

Gerard was seated with a glass of whisky in his hand, facing the

engineer in charge and the specialist sent by air from Texas to supervise the placing of the explosive. He had slept a day and a night. Washed and shaved and clad in clean clothes he scarcely knew himself, so changed did he feel. The whisky was not bourbon or any other American substitute, it was real Scotch.

'I'll know what to say in my report,' said the engineer. 'There's no blame attaching to you. The wound itself wasn't really serious. It was infection that killed him, and that wasn't your fault. I'll make it quite clear. You must have been pretty worried, eh?'

Gerard could not bring himself to believe it until the official receipt accepting delivery of the explosive was placed in his hand.

'Take care of that,' said the engineer. 'It's worth two thousand bucks. I've put in your pal's share as well. They won't get my report at headquarters for a week. So get this: Johnny Mihalescu died here after arriving. Before he died he said he wanted you to have his share. I've spoken to the other men here and they all agree. The Corporation's rich enough.'

'Thank you, thank you,' said Gerard.

Two thousand dollars—the exact figure he needed. Pictures began to dance before his eyes. It was all over—the journey, the torment, the madness, the fear.

'When do you want to start back? If you like we can have someone drive you. There are plenty who wouldn't mind the chance of spending the week-end in Las Piedras. And that'll rest you before you bring the next load along.'

Gerard had forgotten that another load would be needed to make good the one that had blown up on the way. He smiled faintly. Hans Smerloff was welcome to that job! But he saw no reason to mention that he would not be making the trip again.

'I'm all right,' he said. 'I'll drive myself. Just let me finish my drink and I'll be off.'

It was early, and there was not yet much heat in the sun. Sixty hours previously the red lorry had left the coast upon its hazardous enterprise. Three men had died—Bimba, Luigi and Johnny—and perhaps the priest at Los Totumos, who had certainly not been far from death. But Gerard was not concerned to cast up the balance sheet.

When he got into the lorry once more he took an especial pleasure in settling himself at his ease against the padded back-rest, in slamming the door, in letting in the clutch with a bang. He revved up the engine, changed with a careless grinding of gears, and jolted lightheartedly out through the gateway of the camp on to the track. He waved an arm to those remaining behind, and the gesture seemed to him one of mockery. In the driving mirror he could see the engineer

waving back. Then, alone with his plans and the first foretaste of delights to come, he drove towards the future which awaited him anchored at the end of the creek near the little fishing village, rising and falling on the waters of the Caribbean. A tuneless song rose to his lips, a song of victory. The journey back was a race, and his happiness could find no truer expression than in speed. The skill and precision with which he drove were an added source of exaltation. The speedometer needle travelled over the dial—sixty, sixty-five, seventy. . . . As the speed increased the roughness of the track became less perceptible, so that they seemed to glide over the ground, and the engine sang its own high, strident song.

At that speed the three hundred miles back to Las Piedras seemed almost nothing, a few hours driving, that was all. With his hand steady and sure on the wheel of the bounding lorry, his temples cooled by the morning breeze, his mind untroubled by fear, Gerard could let his thoughts turn to the problems that confronted him when he arrived. There would be plenty to do. There was the schooner to be fitted out, the crew to be engaged, a trader's licence to be procured; and then one or two illicit cargoes to be run, for a fabulous profit by arrangement with his friend the chemist; and after that France—Paris—and money to keep him in luxury for a year or two! . . .

It was pleasant to think that after entering Las Piedras he would drive past the Corsario. They would all be there. Linda would be there. . . . The thought of her recalled to his mind his vision of the night before. A woman called Anne! He laughed as he pictured her fury and superstitious terror if he should tell her the tale. . . . Yes, he would pull up for a moment outside the Corsario, and he would say . . .

But he could not imagine what he would say. He pictured himself driving into the Corporation enclosure and getting down outside O'Brien's bungalow.

'Well, boy, so you made it! Nice to see you again!'

But once more imagination failed him, perhaps because for so long he had fought against hope. Boredom and impatience were what he now had to fight against, distracting his mind as best he might with the incidents of the road, which were very few. The plain was flat as though it were spread out on a table. He was driving away from the fire, so that he had not even the billowing smoke to occupy his gaze. On the horizon the plateau ended abruptly at the edge of the sky, and the sharp line, with a kind of luminosity beyond it, indicated clearly the distant presence of the sea.

Not a tree to be seen, not a break in the land; nothing but the endless stretch of sparse vegetation that at a short distance seemed a part of the earth itself, and the two black cylinders of the pipe-line

running on either side of him.

'Don't be in too much of a hurry,' the engineer had said. But it was not with any thought of the Corporation's interests that Gerard was pushing the lorry as it had never been pushed before; he was hurrying on his own account.

As in the dawn that had preceded Johnny's death, a flock of parakeets crossed Gerard's path, carrying their noisy conversation through the sky.

'I must get one for the boat,' he thought. 'Not one of the brightly coloured ones, they're always stupid. One of the plainer kind.'

But they were all charming and funny, once they had been tamed; intelligent and affectionate as dogs. Gerard was seizing upon anything to occupy his mind. He laughed as he recalled a friend who had been turned out of Venezuela for christening his parakeet Bolivar. Well, that was South America. That was what they were all like—arrogant, pretentious, easily ruffled. But now they would treat him differently, now that he was rich. His lightest word be regarded. He might talk as he pleased, act as he pleased, strike customs officials and seduce their wives, and not a word would be said.

He was hungry. He pulled up and explored the contents of the lunch-basket prepared for him by the Chinese cook at the oil-well. There was enough to feed a platoon—tins of lobster and chicken; vegetable stew; chocolate and chewing gum; cans of beer and a bottle of whisky, but it was rye whisky. And as a tribute to heroism triumphant the Chinese had added a sweetmeat of his own, a piece of iguana meat—the country was full of them—dried in the sun, steeped in sugar and smothered in a sticky, greenish-pink sauce. It turned out to be as inedible as it looked, but the gesture was what mattered.

Then he was off again, and once more the hum of the engine became a lullaby. Fortunately he had not eaten a great deal, and he had drunk nothing. In any case things were different now; the struggle against sleep was child's play compared with what he had suffered on the way out. He found himself listening to the silence, which seemed to fill the countryside to the exclusion of all else, a massive, compact and omnipresent silence. At long intervals one of the oil pressure pumps came in sight; but the peaceful chug-chug of its engine seemed soundless, a mere fragment of that universal silence, which it served scarcely to punctuate. The lorry swept past and it ceased to exist. The plain went on . . .

At last—ten miles to Las Piedras! This was where the last part of the descent began, the twisting, plunging mountain road. Now there was

real driving to be done, brakes and clutch-pedal and steering-wheel. The lorry swung out on the curves, seemed to lose its grip, found it again and stormed on. Faster—faster! . . . The excitement of the game had got into Gerard's blood. The next bend must be taken quicker, tighter: but of course it was only a game! Death had opened its jaws and released its prey; it was back there with the hell's brew at the well-head. The lorry now had nothing to do with death. It was a docile beast in the cool hands of a man who had won a victory, a beast that ate up roads, that swung round curves at his command.

And the pace grew faster still, hands moving quickly and surely on gear-lever and steering-wheel, feet working on clutch-pedal, brake and accelerator; and Gerard's heart singing and the blood racing in his veins as he roared in triumph down towards the town.

But now a traffic-panel loomed in view, the sign warning drivers of the three bends where Johnny had preferred to get out and walk, those steep and deadly bends. This was more serious. There was no room for slapdash methods. The brake was needed here.

The brake was needed. . . . For God's sake, the brake! . . .

The foot hard down on the pedal got no response.

Gerard clutched at the handbrake—of course it was not enough. Perhaps there was still time to slow up on the engine by changing down. Taking his foot from the useless footbrake, he disengaged his top gear, revving up his engine with a furious thrust on the accelerator. As he got into fourth gear the speedometer dropped with a jerk to below fifty. The springs and chassis, the whole lorry, groaned with the shock, and there was a sharp scream from one of the rear-wheel tyres which seemed to have come in contact with some piece of metal or wood broken off the chassis. He had about thirty yards in which to reduce his speed by at least half.

Another roar of the engine as he got into third gear. The railing round the rim of the first bend was now right ahead. He raised his foot on the clutch-pedal, and again there was a shock, but a softer one this time, too soft: there was a sharp click, clearly audible through the noise of the engine. Something had broken in the transmission. The lorry began to freewheel.

Gerard hung on grimly to the wheel, striving now to arrest the lorry's progress by flinging it sideways against the cliff-face on the inside of the bend. But now all his tenacity was unavailing. It had served the interests of the Crude Oil Corporation, but it did not serve its owner in this last throw. He had won his victory, but the dice were to cheat him in the end.

There was a gutter on the inside of the road to clear the water that streamed down the cliff-face at the rainy season. The inside front

wheel caught in it, and the lorry, travelling more slowly but still too fast, swung round violently on its front axle, hurling itself backwards across the road and carrying away the railing as it plunged down to the sea. It bounced and twisted as it fell, shedding pieces of itself before the final crash. Gerard was still at the wheel, victim of his own obstinacy, his obstinate resolve to live.

THE END